

In the Simplest Light

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In the Simplest Light

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Summary

Rick has just settled into his new pack and everything is going smoothly. That is, until he meets a new wolf that has wandered through his territory--one that is intriguing and mysterious and smells like the pine woods of the deep south.

Notes

So, this idea just hit me and I couldn't get it out of my head, so here it is. I wanted to play with the idea of mates while still making it perfectly consensual and falling in love, so I hope I represented that well.

This work is complete and will be posted one chapter per day. Also, thanks to the lovely [skarlatha](#) for betaing for me and putting up with my billion questions of "are you SURE this is good?"

This work also has a cover: [Here!](#)

Also, for those who are interested here are the links to what I imagine wolf Daryl and Rick look like: [Rick](#) and [Daryl](#).

Also, shameless plug. I've started to use tumblr again and so I have two tumblrs, if you're interested:

[MAE's Rickyl Fics and Recs](#): Where you can find a list of my fanfic, fanfic recs, and snippets of works in progress.

[Michelle A. Emerlind](#): My general tumblr where I put stuff? And things? And just whatever I want.

The Sighting

The sunset hangs low in the sky, threatening to dip below the horizon and it's one of those nights where the atmosphere is flooded in a sickeningly light violet, cotton candy among the clouds. The moon is starting to come up and full and Rick has his foot pushed to the gas, flooring his car to try and make it to the Greene's by sunset. One hand clutches the steering wheel, the other holding the cellphone carefully balanced in his hand as he *argues* with Lori for the umpteenth billion time over what school is best to start Carl in since it's the end of July and they really need to stop putting this off and *decide*. Why she has chosen to pick now of all times, Rick doesn't know and he tells her so.

"Lori, really, I understand that this is important, but I kind of need to get to Hershel's before the sun sets."

On the other end, Lori pauses. "You're not already *there*?" she asks in disbelief.

Rick rolls his eyes up briefly to the car roof and then back to the road, thinking this is exactly why he didn't want to drive and talk. "No," he says, "I'm not. I was waiting until we were done with this conversation before I started driving."

"Rick," Lori says in that tone, all school teacher and strict, "you are not going to make it by sunset."

Rick sets his jaw and grips the steering wheel, perfectly knowing that fact but trying his hardest to ignore it.

"You should have been there hours ago," Lori tells him, chiding. "Theodore--"

But Rick doesn't want to hear about Lori's new boyfriend and he most certainly doesn't want to hear about her new pack and how she's settling in and how they're all *responsible*, which is apparently the complete opposite of Rick and Shane and so he says in a very clipped and dry tone, "Call you in the morning," and hangs up on her.

He chucks the phone in the passenger's seat and ignores it as it rings, looking up and down the road for somewhere to park. He finds a small shopping center, closed by now, and pulls off into the back where his car is mostly shaded by the overhangings of a neighboring line of trees. He puts the car in park and slides out, making sure to lock the door and then toss the keys on the ground in easy reach of what his body will be like in about five minutes.

Rick leans back against the car door and tilts his head up to the sky, already feeling his heightened senses clicking in--the fresh scent of the forest just a couple of blocks away, the alert sounds of crickets as they call. He thinks tonight will be a good night for howling and his voice will carry across hills and rivers and deep into the cities and into people's beds, where they'll wake up in the morning and *wonder* if that was a dream or if it was really the sound of something wild and primal and beautiful.

Just like Rick used to wonder. Only he's not sure if before he would have called it "beautiful" and there was certainly nothing good in the change that he and his family had undergone--the mugging where Carl was scratched, his attack of Lori and Lori's attack of Shane and Rick. All of it spiraling downhill in a matter of weeks until they were all snarling and at each other's throats, raw and uncaged. And then the fights. Shane and Rick tearing at each other over Lori, unable to give her up even though neither of them wanted her. Unable to give up *power*. And then meeting the others, the Greenes and their calm ways of having been settled into the lifestyle for years, T-Dog and his Atlanta pack--tough in their talk but smooth like suburbs. And, of course, the Woodbury pack up North and their constant threat of danger.

And then, somehow, the breaking off and restructuring. Everything falling apart until they were each alone and then, somehow, coming back together. Lori leaving for Atlanta and taking Carl. The Greenes welcoming Shane and Rick in. Shane and Rick deciding they couldn't be in the same pack and splitting off, Rick meeting Carol and Sophia and her abusive alpha and husband, the taking in of the mysterious and quiet Michonne and the lost, but weirdly social Glenn. The whole group coming together as one to take down Ed on a particularly bad night that Rick doesn't want to remember, where the scent of blood is still lodged in his nose like the rage and intent with which it was spilled. And then Shane. Coming back together with him. Understanding that the two of them were partners like they'd always been and they had to make it work. Becoming some form of binary alpha system like two stars rotating around each other. And then separating themselves from the Greenes--Michonne, Carol, Sophia, and Glenn coming with them until they set up a little pack in their hometown of North Point. Becoming official as four packs in the area--Atlanta, Woodbury, Greene, and North Point.

And now here Rick is, *away* from his family. He sighs and looks around, catalogues the distance from where he is to the Greene's. The two packs stay apart for twenty seven days of the month, but on these three--the full moon and the two surrounding it--Hershel has allowed the North Point gang to come. It's safest there where Hershel owns open land and while they can all control their bestial selves, it's still wildest on the full moon nights, still the most dangerous. Rick thinks it must be about ten miles, which isn't that far to walk when he's switched and so he'll make it by the middle of the night. He just has to get through the area between North Point and the Greene's, which isn't that big of a deal considering that Rick knows these woods and hunts in them most nights that he has free. So he'll just amble and he'll make it there fine. He's strong enough not to let the inner beast slip free.

Rick sighs, tired of waiting, and decides that he's not going to wait until the sunset *forces* him to shift. He's going to do it now, even though there's a little light left. He'll get a good head start and maybe even make it in a couple of hours. He checks to make sure he's alone in the parking lot and lets his body morph from two legs to four, from human skin to gray and white fur, until the only thing that's left of him are his blue eyes and his sharp mind. He shakes himself, reveling in the feel of the summer heat on his body, and tossing aside that last ounce of *humanness*. He grabs the keys he had dropped in his mouth and trots with them to the edge of the treeline, hides them in a hole in a large oak.

He makes his way carefully and silently through the town, skipping along the edges of it until he can get to open country. When he hits forest and brush, he picks up his pace and bounces around happily at the leaves under his paws and the sound of an owl just waking up. Night

descends easily and Rick makes his way alone to the Greene farm, trotting through brush and up hills that he knows like the back of his hand.

He's having a pretty good time, actually, alone and not surrounded by Shane's gruff *let's play* attitude, Michonne's subtle snarkiness, or Glenn's less than subtle pining for one of the Greene girls. He's enjoying himself, that's for sure, letting it just be him and the Georgia ground, until he runs smack into another wolf, one that he sure as hell doesn't know.

He crests a hill and takes a turn along a tree trunk at the same exact time that the other wolf is trying to turn around it as well and they come smack up against each other, practically bumping heads. They both go rigid and still, Rick slipping easily into his dominant position, pulling himself up and letting his hackles rise just slightly. He perks his ears up and looks at the other guy that he should have really been paying attention to because he should have damn well heard him approaching. And even if he didn't, he should have *smelled* him--all deep like the southern woods, cypress like swamps and the combined swirl of pine, dirt, trickling creeks and thistle. Rick takes it all in in a sharp breath, breathing the other wolf in.

His new companion lays his ears flat and lifts one of his front paws, tensing his muscles to run and Rick thinks that he doesn't exactly look submissive, but he doesn't look challenging, either. They stay still, staring one another down. The moonlight flooding in through the trees bathes the two of them and Rick sees tan fur with darker highlights around his muzzle and shoulders. He's about the same height as Rick, about the same size, too, and he has the most striking dark blue eyes that Rick has ever seen. Rick tilts his head in question and is just about to ask him what the hell he's doing in Rick's territory when another wolf barrels into the scene from the other side of the hill.

This one is black and big and mean and he immediately drops into a snarling, puffed up, position and starts stalking toward Rick with anger in his eyes. Rick holds his own and prepares for an uneven fight, but then the tan wolf gets between them and gives the black wolf a look and then the bigger of the two turns and starts rushing away down the hill he came. The tan wolf spares just one look at Rick before he follows, loping along after him gracefully, his paws kicking up dust, but leaving no sound.

Rick watches him go and wonders why the night has suddenly got brighter, why the wind feels just that much warmer. He wonders what it was about the other wolf's coloration and his eyes and the way he moved that set something off in Rick like little bubble wrap popping. Rick *huhs* to himself and turns and follows the path to the Greene farm, moving faster than before even though the other wolf's scent lingers in his nose, heavy and wild.

When Rick finds the rest of his pack, Shane glomps him with an *oomph* that feels more like a semi-truck than a friendly little wolf hug.

The fuck you been? Shane asks him, clicking in to their mental pack frequency with the ease of coming home.

Rick grunts. *Got distracted at sunset*, he says.

Lori, I bet, Michonne guesses, walking up to him and giving him a friendly brush of her shoulder, her lithe body and black fur practically absent in the night, as mysterious as that first time they found her on the side of the road, hit by a car.

Yeah, Rick agrees. Had to walk about ten miles.

Good thing you made it, though, Shane says and stretches his front legs out, yawning and laying his ears flat against his head. He shakes himself off, ruffling his mottled brown and black fur. We're going hunting.

One thing first, Rick says. Ran into another wolf.

Michonne narrows her eyes and Shane blinks at him. *Another wolf?* Shane asks.

One we don't know. Tan. Pretty. He blinks and glosses over his last remark. Two, actually. That one and a big black one. They ran off when they spotted me, but they were around North Point.

In the territory? Michonne asks and Rick nods.

Shane growls and stands up straight. *Let's go after them, then.*

Rick shakes his head. *No, it's getting late. And I'm tired besides.*

They might be just passing through, Michonne says. If they are, they'll be gone anyway.

And if they're not? Shane asks, bristling.

We can go out tomorrow, Rick says, the three of us. Leave Carol and Sophia with Glenn and patrol around North Point. See if we can find them and confront them. I'm not happy about having new guys settling down in our territory, either.

Michonne nods. *I agree.*

Shane sighs. *Works for me, then, he says. Come on, Rick. Carol's been worried about you.* He turns and starts trotting off to their makeshift den at the edge of the Greene family land and Rick trots after him.

Michonne sneaks between them like a snake in the grass and, with mischief in her eyes, she lunges forward and grabs Shane's ankle, tripping him. They go down in play growls and tussles and one of them pulls Rick in and then all three of them roll around in playful fighting, marking each other as family.

The Meeting

Rick taps his fingers on the steering wheel and stares out at the calm, quiet community that he's patrolling. Beside him, Shane groans loudly and throws his head back, smashing it into the seat. "Fuckin' *tired*," he moans and Rick rolls his eyes.

"Told you you shouldn't have went after that deer," Rick says, smiling. "What'd I say?"

Shane looks over at Rick with frustrated hatred in his eyes and Rick can suddenly see teenager Shane in his deep and unhappy frown. "You said 'don't go after that deer, Shane. You need to sleep and you'll be tired in the morning.'"

"See?" Rick says and chuckles. "Should'a listened."

"Fuck you, man," Shane grinds out and rubs his eyes. "Fuck it, I'm just gonna nap. You wake me if some dipshit tries to rob a store or somethin'." Shane closes his eyes and leans back against the window and Rick figures there is absolutely nothing going on this morning, so he'll let him.

Rick yawns himself and stares out at the street, checks all his equipment to make sure it's working. He leans back and examines a coffee shop across from them, wonders if he should pop in and get himself something to perk him up. And then, like a lightning bolt striking his neck and shooting straight down his spine, he *feels* a presence. He sits up in his seat and cast his gaze around and behind his eyes, he sees tan and brown and his nostrils sting with pine and thistle. Rick blinks and then a truck passes by them, pauses at a stoplight. He can barely see the outline of a man--about the same height as Rick, thin and muscular body and he *knows* deep down in the marrow of his bones, that this is the wolf he met last night. The stoplight goes green, but the truck doesn't move for a minute. And then, the moment breaks. The truck zooms away and Rick reaches over, elbows Shane in the ribs.

Shane *oomphs*. "Goddammit, man," he says, "I was dreamin' about Renee Appleton."

Rick rolls his eyes at the mention of the cheerleader captain from their high school and points down the road. "Guy drove past in a truck--"

"Bully for him," Shane growls.

"--and it was the wolf. From last night."

Shane blinks and frowns. "You sure?"

"*Sure*," Rick says and gives Shane a look.

"We goin' after him?"

Rick looks to where the truck had disappeared and thinks about chasing him down, confronting him. But there's only so much you can do in polite society and the police

uniform he has on hangs heavy on his shoulders. He shakes his head. "Tonight," he says. "Easier outside of society." He pauses and then offers Shane the option to overrule him, turning his statement into a question. "Right?"

Shane nods. "Right," he says, "want to be a wolf so I can tear his throat out if I need to."

Something in Rick jumps at that, a guttural *no* forming on his lips, but he presses it down. If these guys are threatening, Shane is right. They'll be dealt with.

They meet Michonne at the edge of town a little before sunset and go over their plan. They'll start at their current position, which is the very eastern corner of their territory. They'll spread out and go west, combing the woods for the two wolves, and if they don't find them, they'll just keep going west to Hershel's farm and Glenn and the others. Shane gives one last call to Glenn to tell him that they plan to be at the farm sometime that night, but not to panic if they don't show up and Shane will call him at sunrise if that's the case.

They dip into the woods a little to be out of the town's sight and then they change. They start walking forward into the territory, Rick and Shane walking beside one another, Shane to Rick's left, and Michonne behind the both of them. The forest is eerily quiet, not even the birds singing, like they know that something is about to go down. Rick perks up his ears to listen for little small sounds and he dips his head to run it along the ground, hoping to pick up some kind of scent.

For the first half an hour, nothing. For the second, they run into a panicked deer that Shane briefly wants to chase before he realizes he's supposed to be on a mission. For the third, they find nothing but a couple of squirrels. But then, as they're trotting next to a little creek, Rick picks it up. Just a fair little whiff of scent, faint and soft, but still pine woods and he gives out a little bark. Michonne and Shane turn to him from where they've started to wonder off. *Anything?* Shane asks.

Rick lays his ears back and puts his muzzle down to the ground, follows the trail up a couple of feet until he's locked into it like a screw in a board. *Got his scent*, Rick says.

He can feel Michonne mentally frown at him. *I don't smell anything*, she says, coming along beside Rick and putting her nose close to where his is. That's weird, Rick thinks, because Michonne is usually the first to pick up trails and could find a single rat in a sewer. He frowns back at her.

It's here, he says. *Faint*.

Well, what are we doing standing around like dumbasses for? Shane questions and then shoves his head into Rick's side to push Rick along. Rick briefly growls, but it's not very confrontational, just showing his dislike and then he picks up his pace, following the trail. Shane and Michonne follow him and he starts jogging and then breaks out into a full-out run as the scent gets heavier and hotter.

You don't smell it? he asks them.

Shane shakes his head, running behind him, but Michonne frowns again. *I do*, she says. *Faint, though.*

Cypress, huh? Rick asks and Michonne gives him a funny look.

Just smells like a wolf, she says.

Rick *huhs* at that, but then rushes up a small hill and down into another valley and that's when his senses splinter and split, dividing and shattering among the forest ground. He turns around in a circle and lifts his nose to smell, but can't quite pick out which scent is newest. He lays his ears flat and whines. *He's been here too much*, Rick says, *can't quite pick out one trail from all of them.*

Shane lifts his head and starts scanning the woods in front of them. *Then they're close*, he says, *Split up. Howl if you find them.* He dashes off to the right and Michonne dashes to the left, leaving Rick the dead center, so he rushes forward into the heavier brambles and brush, his hackles raised in anticipation. The denser part that Rick is in evens out soon enough to a grassy slope of a hill and when Rick gets clear of the brush blocking his eyesight, he looks up at the top of the incline and sees a familiar tan figure trotting along the crest.

Rick stills and raises himself up in defensive position. At the top of the hill, the figure senses someone watching him and turns, raising his own ears. Rick can see that he has a rabbit in his mouth, dangling out of it and looking freshly caught. They stare down at one another, the air hesitating and crackling with possibility.

Rick lifts his paw to take a step forward and the other wolf tenses back as if to run, but doesn't follow through in the motion. Rick sets down his paw gingerly on the forest floor. *Hello*, he projects on his personal default frequency. He expects, like has always happened, that the other wolf won't hear him or will hear him muffled and it will take a moment for them to click into the right frequency to be able to understand each other. He blinks in surprise when the other wolf answers back, crystal clear and molding to Rick's mental connection like two magnets snapping together, *Hello*.

Rick lets go of a small whine and doesn't exactly understand why. *I'm Rick*, he says, because it's suddenly very, very important that the other wolf know his name.

Daryl, the other wolf says and twitches his ear back and then up again.

Daryl, Rick thinks, the name somehow soft and comforting, fitting him just like a glove. Daryl, the pretty tan wolf. *You're in my territory*, Rick tells him.

Daryl mentally scoffs. *Duh*, he says, *can smell you all over it.*

Rick blinks, because it hasn't occurred to him that maybe Daryl can smell him just as much as he can Daryl and he suddenly wants to do that thing you do as a human where you check your armpits for stink. He lays his ears back. *Then why are you in it?*

Daryl bristles in defense and his voice is cold in Rick's head. *Just passin' through*, he says and then turns and flees down the hill, out of Rick's sight. Rick rushes up the hill to find him

and when he crests it, he rushes forward to Daryl, who senses him and turns, his body going low to the ground and hackles raised. The rabbit is still lodged firmly in Daryl's jaw, but Rick is sure that he can still hear the barest hint of a growl. *Don't want no trouble*, Daryl says.

Rick takes a step back, but lifts his tail and his body into an aggressive stance, wanting Daryl to know that this really is his territory and that he really does have the power. *Could've asked before you go around stealing people's food supplies*.

Daryl watches him warily, but doesn't move an inch as Rick starts circling him. *Pssh. Rabbit population is booming so much, I bet you've never even ate one*.

Rick bares his teeth, even though that's true. *Still mine*.

Selfish, Daryl says with an air that this is not the first argument he's had like this, with something old and worn in his voice. *Just trying to get by. Won't bother you none*.

Rick is just about to relent, to offer some form of peace treaty, when the big black wolf from last night breaks onto the scene and, seeing Rick cornering Daryl, rushes at him snarling and heavy. Rick growls loud into the night and snaps his teeth and prepares, but Daryl yells *MERLE!* and even though it's muffled and not on Rick's right frequency, he can still hear the desperation in Daryl's voice. Rick hears them talking, but what they're working on is so far from what he's used to that it's like hearing two voices yards away and he's unable to hear the actual words. But then Merle turns to him and snaps and Rick yells *Shane!* on his own frequency, hoping Shane and Michonne haven't got so far away that they can't hear it.

Fuck, Daryl says to Merle, but wanting Rick to hear. He turns to run. *He's called his others*.

Merle puffs up, but turns and Rick watches as they both kick up their heels to flee, but then Shane burst through a patch of trees right in front of the two strangers, snarling and just as large as Merle and slams into the black wolf, pushing him back. Daryl stumbles with Merle and drops his rabbit and Michonne slips onto the scene, as quiet as a cobra and then they are circling them, Merle and Daryl in the middle, surrounded.

Daryl sits low to the ground and growls hard up at Rick, his teeth bared and fur bristled and rough. Michonne waits, silent and deadly for either of them to come her way. Shane snaps at Merle and Merle snaps back and Shane says, loud and booming, *You fuckers better get GONE*.

You don't OWN Georgia, you rich little hipster dick, Merle says and then there's more snapping and they go down in yelps and snarls and teeth, nipping and pushing and biting, but more warning shots than anything serious.

We ain't gonna bother you, Daryl says again, low and desperate.

Shane, Rick says and Shane kicks Merle hard in the stomach once before breaking away and shaking himself out, growling and posturing.

What? You believe his little bitch?

My brother ain't no BITCH, bitch, Merle says and then they jump back to it, but Michonne steps in like a thunderbolt and separates them.

What are you doing here? Rick asks.

Fuckin' living, Merle snaps.

Needed a place to stay for the moon, Daryl tells Rick evenly and then slowly relaxes his face and the hair on his back. *Just...just need a place to stay. Tonight and tomorrow. Then we'll be gone and you'll never see us again.*

Rick looks over at Shane and Shane growls, but nods his consent.

Fine, Rick says, *get gone.* Something bubbles up in him, a sickening pit of guilt that he's said the wrong thing, but Merle turns and crashes across the ground. Daryl turns to leave, but then swings back around, grabs the rabbit that fell by Rick's feet with such a quick and low motion that Rick barely has time to notice it, Daryl's body jerking forward and then back away from Rick like Rick is a pile of hot coals. And then he's gone as well, rushing low behind his brother, off into the night.

The Following

Chapter Notes

I have also put up links to pictures of Rick and Daryl as wolves in the notes on chapter one, so go check those out if you didn't see them!

Michonne and Shane turn back to Hershel's, but Rick pauses and just can't make himself do it. He has a nagging feeling that he should have said something else to Daryl, that that wasn't the way that things were supposed to end.

I'm going to stay here, Rick tells the other two and Michonne dips her head and gives him a strange look.

Why? Shane asks, quirking his head in wolf curiosity.

I want to make sure they really don't make trouble, Rick says, pushing down the nagging voice in his head. *I figure maybe I'll follow them till dawn, see where they're staying in North Point in case we need that information for later.*

Shane seems to accept this and stands firm. *Cool. I'll back you up.*

Rick shakes his head and takes a step back. *No, I'm good. You guys go ahead.*

Shane whines in confusion. *You sure?*

Sure, Rick says.

Michonne looks him and up and down. *You considering him?* She asks.

Rick blinks. *What?*

That tan wolf, she says and when Rick sends her a burst of confused mental energy, she just shakes her head.

She gives him back a mental smile. *Nevermind*, she says knowingly and then starts trotting off toward the farm. Shane shrugs at the two of them and jogs forward in front of Michonne, bumping her back in an affirmation of his place. Michonne ducks her head and slows her stance until she's walking level with Shane's hip and the two of them head off into the woods.

Rick turns, alone now, and perks his ears up at the forest. He heads off in the direction that Merle and Daryl went, but slowly, taking his time making his way through the forest. He

doesn't want an actual encounter, both because he doesn't know what he's say and because he's pretty sure that Merle would tear him to shreds, or at least try to.

Within minutes, he picks up the trail where they diverged off and he follows it, ambling through the night. Merle and Daryl move around in circles, staying not too far from the road and Rick has to pause and hide at one point when he gets too close to them. He kind of wishes he didn't have to avoid them. Daryl seemed nice enough and maybe Merle was good, too, once you got to know him. He wonders briefly if they have room in their pack for two others and then he wonders what it would be like to trot through the forest with Daryl at his hip, his rabbit catcher, his pretty tan companion.

Rick blinks and lowers his ears. He really needs to stop thinking of Daryl as *pretty*. Women are pretty. Jewels are pretty. Daryl is a wolf. Just a tan wolf and a guy and Rick has no right thinking about how deep blue his eyes are. Or about how the scent lodged in Rick's muzzle feels safe, like it's where it's supposed to be.

After awhile, the sun comes up and Rick meanders after the two until he gets to the edge of town. He hunkers down in the brush and watches a motel across the street where the two wolves had slipped into through an open window. He waits, not sure what he's actually looking for, until he sees in the window a figure and his heart beats in anticipation. Suddenly, he wants to see what Daryl looks like as a human, wants to witness the color of his hair and the outline of his body, the size of his feet, and the exact shape of his nose. In the bushes, Rick whines and puts his head on his paws, ears perked up and waiting.

It takes them thirty minutes and Rick is just about to give up, when the door opens and a tall, filled out, and gruff man with a bald head steps out and wanders to a truck in the parking lot. "You're just gonna have'ta forget about that," Rick's keen ears pick up.

Another man follows him out, carrying a duffel bag in his hand, and Rick knows that this is Daryl. He blinks at the shaggy hair, the sleeveless shirt with the defined biceps, the rather loose but good looking pants. "Merle, that's stupid," Daryl says and throws the duffel bag in the back of the truck, putting his hands on the rim and staring across at Merle. Merle scoffs and Daryl continues, "Stupider than that time you thought you could eat a hundred nuggets."

"HEY," Merle snaps, "I got sixty seven."

Daryl rolls his eyes. "We're not staying. You heard the pack. They want us gone and I ain't in no mood to argue with that."

"Fuck," Merle says and waves his arm angrily, then tugs at the driver's side door and reaches in, grabs a pack of cigarettes and sticks one in his mouth, dangling loosely while he talks. "Could take 'em. Little black one looked like a bitch and that gray one was a pussy. Only one we'd have to deal with is that musky one and I could get him." He lights his cigarette and gives Daryl challenging eyes.

Daryl shakes his head. "Not worth it. We just keep on keepin' on. Go north or something."

"*North*," Merle snaps. "I ain't no Yankee ass douche fucker. I ain't going *north*. I'm staying in the goddamn south where I goddamn belong and no little pissant pack that's barely outta

their little wolfie diapers is gonna *stop* me. Ain't you tired of runnin'? How long we been wanderers, huh? I've fucking sick of it."

Daryl grits his teeth. "Yes, I'm tired of it," he says, "don't change nothin', though. We'll find a place eventually."

"Used to be," Merle starts and Daryl rolls his eyes, turns around and puts his back to the truck and his hands in his pocket in the familiar gesture of someone who's heard it, "that there was a thing called *tradition*. Used to be that there was some goddamn *respect* for your elders and *respect* for hundred year old names. Used to be that a man that'd been born a wolf could'a expected a little land and a little *dignity*. But no. Now I can't swing my cock around without hitting fifty of these little bitty *turned fuckers*." He walks around the truck and jabs his hand into Daryl's chest. "Bet on Mom's grave that none of 'em been wolves for even a year. And they're runnin' us *off*? Fuck no. You been catchin' rabbit since you was three and I've been howling since I was just out of Mom's stomach and no. We ain't gonna back down like some pansy-assed whore shits."

Daryl holds his gaze evenly and shrugs. "Don't want a fight," he says. "So I'm leaving and you're coming with me or not."

"Oh, don't give me that shit," Merle says and takes a long drag of his cigarette.

Daryl shrugs again. "I'm not fighting." He sighs. "Don't want that gray one hurt, either."

Rick perks his ears up harder and he lifts his head from his paws. Surely Daryl isn't talking about *him*. Merle turns his head and blows out a hard puff of smoke. "Ah, fuck," he says and shakes his head. "*Knew* it."

Daryl glares. "Ain't like I got a *choice*, Merle," Daryl says and stomps back into the room and Rick wonders just what that means. Merle follows him, still arguing, but their voices are too muffled by the room for Rick to hear and he sighs. He waits for another twenty minutes, but they don't emerge, so eventually he pulls himself up slowly and heads on home.

It's Rick, this time, who's tired once he gets to the police station, dressed and ready for his desk shift. Shane slides over to his desk easily when he sees him and gives him an up-and-down look. "Shouldn't have gone after your deer," he says, snidely. "Well, metaphorical deer. Guess in this case was a wolf."

Rick just gives him the "not in the mood" stare and falls down into his office chair, rubbing at his eyes. "Found 'em," he says. "Out in the Valley Motel on Cheshire. Heard them talking, too. Guess they're wolves by birth. Seems like the big one--Merle--wants to take us on, but his little brother didn't seem to want to. They're roamers and have been for awhile."

Shane sets his jaw. "You think they'll start something?"

Rick shrugs. "Don't know. Figure one of us should patrol tonight, at least. I can go. Had a good conversation with the tan wolf before his brother showed up. Figure maybe I could talk

to him if they seem rough.”

Shane sighs. “Don’t really like you going alone, man.”

“I know,” Rick says, “but all of us would be pretty aggressive.” He pauses, thinks about Daryl and his desperation last night, thinks about his worn voice and Merle’s blatant frustrations. “You think...you think we have room for two more?”

Shane blinks. “Two more what? WOLVES? You want to take them in?”

Rick shrugs and tries to think of a logical answer for his suggestion, instead of *he just smells good*. “I, um...” Finally, he latches onto something concrete. “Glenn might be leaving soon. You know he’s enamored with Maggie. And with Woodbury so close...might be nice to have more muscle.”

Shane wrinkles his nose. “I don’t know, brother. I don’t really trust the scrawny one. I mean, the black one...him I get. He’s upset, he lets you know. Figure if he’s on our side, that’s good. But the other one seems shifty.”

Rick bites back an illogical reaction to defend Daryl and instead shrugs. “Somethin’ to think about,” he says and lets it go.

The Encounter

Chapter Notes

Or the chapter in which it is a date, but Rick does not realize it is a date...

Rick spends the afternoon napping and saving his energy for the night and at dusk, he's at the edge of town and turning, shaking his fur out and loping down the hill into the woods. The night creeps over the forest, slow and soft like a blanket and Rick tilts his nose to the wind, revels in the fact that he is part of the landscape. He keeps moving, patrolling as it were, but he also takes time just to enjoy himself--jumping at a falling leaf and playing with it, yipping at a squirrel and watching it shoot up a tree, splashing through the creek and feeling his paws cold in the water.

He makes his way further inward, away from the town and stops at the edge of a large valley, lays down to rest for a moment, planning to get up after a few minutes and head back toward town. He's almost to the stage of dozing when he sees a movement at the corner of his vision. He lifts his head and perks his ears and sees a rabbit hopping in the valley, a little down from him. He barely has time to process *prey* when he watches a figure melt from the treeline to his left and rush across the ground, paws silent and deadly. Daryl.

Rick sits up and watches as Daryl flies down the hill and sees the rabbit spot him. The rabbit takes off and Daryl chases it and it whips and turns and Rick thinks it just might get away when it banks to the left and Daryl anticipates it and snatches it hard in his jaw, crushing its neck and sliding to a stop in the dirt. With one final twist, the rabbit dies and after a second, Daryl stands up and starts trotting back the way he came.

Rick melts from his own shadows and watches the realization that he's been watched flash across Daryl's eyes. Daryl never pauses as he trots on, but he perks his ears at the sight of Rick and then lays them flat. *Don't want trouble*, he says and paws on past Rick.

Rick blinks. *Me either*, he says and marvels about how easy his voice slides into Daryl's mental space. He starts walking after him. *Guess I was pretty harsh last night. Sorry. Should be more welcoming.*

Daryl mentally shrugs. *Your territory.*

You're a good hunter, Rick says, hoping to break the ice. Daryl looks back over his shoulder at Rick, the rabbit dangling from his muzzle.

Thanks, he says.

Rick falls into silence, trotting alongside him and wonders if maybe this is a bad idea. If maybe he should leave Daryl alone. But then he thinks about Daryl's tired voice and the mysterious thing he said about Rick and not having a choice. *Going back to your brother?* he questions.

Daryl shakes his head. *Ran after a deer. Figure he'll be gone most of the night.*

Why didn't you go with him? Rick asks and increases his pace so that he's walking neck and neck with Daryl. Daryl lets a little whine go around the rabbit and he slows his pace so that Rick is walking in front. He looks torn and Rick slows down, realizing that he doesn't know where Daryl was headed. Daryl pauses beside him and drops his head, lowering his tail and bowing himself down to Rick.

*You're not gonna...*he starts and then drops the rabbit at Rick's feet. *I don't want any trouble,* he says and takes a step back. Rick suddenly wonders just how many packs Daryl has encountered and just how many of them have been way more unwelcoming than he himself has been.

Rick dips his head so that he can meet Daryl's eyes and Daryl's ears come halfway back up. *Rest of my pack isn't here,* he says. *Wouldn't hurt you, anyway, if that's what you're worried about.*

...sorry about your rabbit.

Rick noses it toward him. *Take it. You caught it.*

Daryl watches him for a minute and then ever so slowly leans forward and puts it back in his mouth. His movement brings his head and neck within range of Rick and Rick suddenly realizes just how *vulnerable* it is and how easy it would be for Rick to grab ahold of it and strangle him. Daryl pauses in his motion, staying incredibly still and Rick gives out a tiny little whine of encouragement. Daryl pulls his head back and straightens himself up. *Was headed to that little outcropping up there,* he says and Rick looks up to where a rocky part of a hill creates a small little hole of shelter. He nods and leads the way and Daryl follows him, his tail and head down and his body close to Rick's hip.

When they get to the outcropping, Daryl lays down curling his tail around his back legs and bringing the rabbit between his two paws. He starts to eat, but then pauses. *Do, um...you want it?* he asks and Rick thinks of pack hierarchy and who eats first.

You caught it, he says and lays down far enough away from Daryl to give him some space, but close enough that he can still fill his lungs with Daryl's scent---woods deep and all southern. *So...why didn't you go with Merle?*

Daryl shrugs at him, Rick's mental space filling with his emotion, open and tangled, but with an underlying rush that's closed off from Rick. *Damn bastard thinks he can only eat if it's deer. Thinks it's manly or something to chase after that. Thing is, he never catches one and I was hungry.*

Rick smiles and lays his head on his paws, and the calm and vulnerable posture seems to give Daryl some comfort. *Shane's like that, too,* Rick says. *Always comes back hungry.*

Daryl smiles at him timidly and Rick blinks at the juxtaposition between that and his confident strides and superior hunting skills. *So, you guys loners?* Rick asks, partly because he wants Daryl's voice in his head and partly because he's just curious.

Yeah, Daryl says, *ever since we were grown. We're an old family. Was born into it. But it splintered and my daddy...well, he wasn't very good. Merle and I split and we've been wandering ever since.*

Hmm, Rick says and stares out at the quiet forest in front of them. *I've only been one for nine months. My kid was bit. Then my wife. Then me and then Shane.* Daryl pauses at the word wife, so Rick clarifies. *Then she divorced me. Took the kid to the Atlanta pack. So now it's just me. Well, and Shane and the rest of North Point.*

Daryl blinks and chews on his rabbit, crunching a bone. *You and Shane seem both...*

Alpha? Rick asks and then mentally nods. *Yeah. Kind of weird, I guess. From what I've heard, but we're making it work. Neither one of us can back down and, well, neither one of us can live without each other, either.*

But he's not your mate, Daryl says and it's a statement rather than a question. Rick lays his ears back because he's confused. He just told Daryl wife, so he figured that Daryl would have picked up on that. But maybe wolf culture is different.

No, Rick says and then, because something in him tells him he *has* to make it clear, *don't have a mate.*

Daryl grunts and then focuses on his rabbit. *Me, either,* he says and his voice is soft in Rick's mind.

Rick suddenly feels the need for physical contact and he's learned over the course of his wolfhood to trust his instincts. He stands up and Daryl freezes in mid bite. Rick takes a step forward and Daryl shrinks into himself and lays his ears back, drops the rabbit and scoots away from it.

Don't want your rabbit, Rick tells him and Daryl avoids eye contact.

What'd you want, then? he asks.

Rick settles down again, laying next to Daryl this time and he stretches his back legs out so that one of them is against Daryl's hip. Rick watches him for a moment. *Want to get to know you,* he says and tells himself that that makes sense. If he's thinking about this guy being a potential pack member--and let's face it, he is, despite what Shane may say--then he wants to know how they'll interact together. How they'll move together. How it feels to have his leg touching Daryl's fur.

Rick lays his head back down on the dirt and Daryl relaxes, takes up the rabbit again. *Not much to know*, he says.

You ever been in a pack before? Rick asks.

Daryl shrugs. *My family when I was younger. Then it's just been me and Merle.*

You seem like you'd be good at it, Rick says.

Daryl mentally shrugs again. *Know how to handle the dynamics*, I guess.

Good hunter, too, Rick says.

Yeah, Daryl tells him and then looks down at the rabbit, shoves it with his nose toward Rick. *I'm done. I mean, if you want it.*

Rick blinks at it. *Oh, no, I don't...um...not into rabbit.*

Daryl stares at him. *Don't tell me you're all domesticated and shit and that you eat puppychow instead of wild animals, Mr. Werecollie.*

Rick growls at that, a low sound that's not meant to be aggressive, just expressing emotion like a frown. Daryl seems to take it the way it was intended and Rick looks at the rabbit, wonders if he can eat it just to prove a point. He most certainly isn't going to tell Daryl that most nights the pack ends up eating steaks and packaged chicken and he for *sure* isn't going to mention the squeaky toy he has lodged in the old cabin they have made their den.

Rick leans his head up and watches as Daryl ducks his down like they're on a seesaw. He leans forward and grabs the rabbit in his maw and starts chewing on it and finds it surprisingly appetizing. Daryl lays his head on the ground in a mock of Rick earlier and as Rick starts to eat, he slowly scoots closer, his paws sliding against the dirt floor until he's right up against Rick's side, just an inch and several bridges of static fur separating them. Daryl whines low and soft and lays his head right next to Rick's paws and Rick wonders what that all means and why he suddenly wants to lean over and lick Daryl's ear, wants to let Daryl lay his head on Rick's paws and his head on Daryl's head and just wait out the night with the soft smell of summer in the breeze.

Kind of like you, Daryl says, his mental voice just a whisper. *Kind of thinkin' about what it would be like to be in your pack.*

Me, too, Rick says as he finishes the rabbit.

Daryl looks up at him, his ears still flat against his head and his eyes big and round. *You think maybe you could let me?*

Rick knows that he should probably discuss this with Shane first, but he doesn't have any room in his heart to say anything but yes, so he nods and figures that he'll convince Shane later. *Yeah*, he says and then watches as Daryl's ears rise up and his tail wags. Rick smiles and feels his own tail swinging against his legs and then, suddenly, he wants to stand. Wants

to walk through the forests with Daryl. So he rises and starts walking from the outcrop and feels more than sees or hears Daryl following him.

Wait, Daryl says and Rick pauses. Daryl shyly slides up to him and leans forward. *Got some rabbit*, he says and ducks his head to Rick's shoulder, pulling the piece of rabbit out of Rick's fur with his teeth. He finishes cleaning Rick with a solid lick and Rick feels thunder pounding in his veins. He grunts and looks off into the forest.

Let's go, he says to distract himself from the feel of Daryl grooming him and he heads off into the brush. Daryl glues himself to Rick's right hip again, trotting along at the same pace as Rick. Rick slows and feels Daryl slow with him, speeds up and feels Daryl catch up with him. He breaks into a run across the more open ground and Daryl matches him step for step until Rick suddenly grinds to a halt. Daryl stumbles, his forward motion bringing him slightly in front of Rick and as he realizes it, he flattens to the ground and whines, dipping his head and his tail down until Rick takes a step out in front of him again.

You do that on purpose? Daryl asks.

Wanted to see, Rick responds.

Daryl sets himself next to Rick's hip again. *Ain't gonna have no trouble from me*, he says. *I swear. Never was an alpha.*

Rick nods. *I'm getting that*, he says. *You don't have to be so submissive, though*, he adds, *I'm not going to hurt you.*

Daryl whines, but nods. *Better to be on the safe side*, he says and brushes his body up against Rick, who shivers at the brief contact.

Want to do anything particular? Rick asks, figuring he better offer the question because Daryl would never volunteer the information.

Daryl looks at him a little sheepish and then shrugs. *Kinda hungry*, he says.

Rick blinks. *I thought you were DONE with that rabbit.*

Wanted to share.

Rick looks over the valley below them and thinks to himself that it can't be that hard to catch a rabbit. Right? He watched Daryl do it. *I'll get it this time*, he says and Daryl narrows his eyes.

You SURE? he asks and Rick scoffs.

I can hunt, too, he says and hopes that the universe is kind to him and doesn't make him fall flat on his ass. He scans down into the valley and waits for movement and when he sees it far off, he slinks forward slowly, stalking until he's in a good position to rush forward, running across the ground as fast as he can. The rabbit spots him and takes off, hopping far and wide and rushing across the ground, curving and bending. Rick follows it as best as he can and if he stumbles once or twice, that's okay, because he's right behind it. And then it takes a jab to

the left and Rick follows and then he thinks it'll take another one, more to the left and he tries to cut it off, but his foot gets caught on a root sticking up and he tumbles down in a big pile of humiliation.

Behind him, Daryl's voice carries into his mind, laughing so hard Rick is afraid he'll burst his spleen. *Jesus*, Daryl says and trots forward to him, *how many rabbits you caught in your lifetime, huh? Your technique sucks donkey balls.*

Rick huffs unhappily and stands up, shaking himself off. *Stupid rabbits*, he grumbles.

You are NEVER going to catch anything like that, Daryl says.

Rick has a streak of inspiration and he turns on him. *Could catch something though*, he says and gives a pointed up and down look at Daryl. Daryl perks his ears up and lifts one paw in anticipation. *No hurting*, Rick feels the need to clarify, *just playing* and then he lunges at Daryl. Daryl slips back easily away from him and then perks his whole body up at Rick and waits until Rick lunges a second time and then he bolts, his paws flying fast and free through the brush. Rick crashes after him and sends a mental burst of happiness Daryl's way and marvels in the return grin he gets in return.

Rick chases Daryl through the forest, happy that this really *is* his territory and he knows it so very well. He steers Daryl away from the creek, cutting him off whenever he tries to turn that way and curving him toward the big hill that lies to the southeast of town. He knows that from this side, the hill is sheer up and rocky, more a small cliff, and he figures he can corner Daryl there and win.

He cuts off Daryl as Daryl tries to rush through a set of pines and turns him up to toward the cliff and as Daryl crashes through some underbrush, Rick thinks he has him. But when Rick gets to the other side of it, he looks around and doesn't find Daryl anywhere in sight. He blinks and looks around, lifts his nose to catch his scent.

And then, at the top of the cliff, Daryl appears and wags his tail. *Didn't think I was that stupid, huh?* he ask and Rick realizes that he must have made a sharp left turn to climb the side of the hill. Rick playfully growls and then takes off after him and Daryl disappears down the hill in a good head start.

Rick manages to get past the obstacle quickly, though, and he rushes across the ground as quickly as he can, weaving through trees and knowing that Daryl is heading to heavier brush and if he can just get ahead of him...there! Rick barrels into him, growling playfully and he hears Daryl's laugh in his head and blinks in surprise at how *good* it makes him feel that Daryl feels safe.

Daryl rolls over when Rick plows into him and exposes his stomach to Rick, laying his ears back, but thwapping his tail against the ground. Rick wags his tail back and perks his ears, suddenly *so very interested* in Daryl's position and then Daryl lifts one front paw, puts it on Rick's chest and the contact is electrifying and terrifyingly *right*.

Daryl suddenly flips over and spins around, keeping his body low to the ground, but moving with such playful energy that it just infuses Rick's being with happiness. Daryl leans up,

wagging his tail ridiculously hard now and he nuzzles Rick's jaw and then licks his muzzle and Rick freezes, his stomach flipping into knots.

They do this all the time, his pack--Michonne and Carol and Glenn. It's always platonic, always part of the pack dynamic. It's what wolves *do* when interacting with the pack leader and Rick has felt it and has seen it been done to Shane so many times that it should feel perfectly normal when someone else does it. But when *Daryl* does--

Rick's brain freezes, unable to process. He has a brief flash of thought that his body might know something more than his mind right now and he blinks down at Daryl, who seems to just realize that Rick is more defensive now than playful.

Daryl stills, but keeps his body low and he rolls over again, exposing his vulnerable side a second time. He whines and Rick realizes that he needs some form of assurance, so Rick tucks his head to run alongside Daryl's in what he hopes is a comforting gesture. Daryl slowly falls over onto his side and thumps his tail against the ground. Rick collapses beside him, huffing, and they stay silent for a moment, staring at the treeline.

Sorry if I-- Daryl starts, but Rick interrupts him.

No, he says, *my fault*.

Daryl looks at Rick and then slowly rolls onto his stomach again and scoots up to Rick in the same position he'd been in the outcropping. *So you'll talk with your other alpha?* he asks.

Rick nods. *Yeah. And you'll talk with your brother?*

Yeah, Daryl says. *Sunrise soon. So I guess I should probably go. But...I could meet you tomorrow? Same field as tonight?*

Rick smiles and nods and then leans over and bumps his head against Daryl's. *Sounds perfect.*

Rick meets up with Shane the next afternoon as Shane pulls into the driveway in the patrol car. Rick swallows hard, because he knows that he has to have the "I invited this guy into our pack" conversation and he's not entirely sure where to begin.

He hops in the passenger's side and Shane pulls out and heads toward the south side of town where they'll patrol this morning. "How was your night?" Shane asks him innocently enough.

Rick shrugs. "Good," he says and then pauses. "Ran into that tan wolf again."

Shane grunts. "Cause any trouble?"

Rick shakes his head. "No, we got along fine." He chews his bottom lip. "Pretty submissive. Followed me around for awhile and acted...really good. Think he could fit in with us."

Shane slides his eyes over to Rick before looking at the road again. "Thought we decided no."

"That's before I really got to know him," Rick says. "You should, too. Think he would be really good for us. Damn good hunter."

"Deer?" Shane asks, raising his eyebrows and looking hopeful.

"Rabbit," Rick tells him and Shane scoffs.

"Anyone could catch a rabbit," Shane says and Rick blushes a little, thinking about his epic fail from last night.

"Well, his brother was out trying to get one. Deer, I mean. Don't know if he did or not. But, um...we could meet them again, maybe. Tonight, before they head out. Give it one last go?"

Shane stares out at the road in thought, but he finally shrugs. "Sure. I could do that, I guess. Wouldn't hurt. Hey...what'd you think Michonne meant when she said that thing to you yesterday about considerin' him? She said the same damn thing to me last night."

"About Daryl?" Rick says and tries to mask the growl of jealousy in his voice.

Shane scoffs and shakes his head. "No, the other one. *Merle*," he says, letting it just roll off his tongue. He smiles and then catches himself doing it and frowns. "Whatever. Anyway. What you think she meant?"

"No idea," Rick says. "You know, I was thinking about that...I mean, Maggie is all the time trying to get us to learn about werewolf culture. Maybe we should take her up on one of her lessons."

"Nah," Shane says and shakes his head again. "I don't need no fancy terminology to know what's going on with my damn self."

Rick "hmms" and is about to follow up with another point when the radio flares to life, announcing an assault happening at the Valley Motel and officers who are close needed. Rick grabs the radio and calls back that he and Shane are on the way and Shane floors the gas and hits the lights. Rick tries not to think too hard about Daryl, his rough country clothing and his tanned biceps.

When they pull into the motel parking lot, they see the cause of the call. Two guys who Rick has never seen before are really at each other, throwing punches and looking like they might have already escalated to more harmful weapons than their fists if they had had them. Shane flings himself out of the car with Rick right behind him, and with one solid yell from Shane's booming voice, the two men split up, bleeding and bruised and suddenly stone quiet in the face of the police. Shane puts on his authoritarian stance and goes to barking out questions about what the hell they think they're doing and Rick starts pushing back the growing audience, telling everyone they have it under control. A second police car pulls in as requested and one of the officers gets out and joins Shane. Rick can hear the murmured

Miranda rights and he sees Shane putting one of the guys in their car while the other car takes his partner in crime.

Rick is just about to turn back to Shane when he sees Daryl further down, at the edge of the crowd. Rick blinks and looks up at him and suddenly realizes that this is the first time that *Daryl* has seen *him* when he's not gray and lanky. Daryl gives him an up-and-down and then Rick watches as he sets his jaw and spins on his heel, heading back to his room. Rick spares one glance at Shane to make sure he's got everything under control and then he slides through the crowd, rushing to Daryl.

"Daryl!" he calls, but Daryl holds up a hand.

"Save it," he says and keeps on walking.

Rick furrows his brow in confusion. "What--"

"Didn't know you was a cop," Daryl grinds out and then spits on the concrete for emphasis. "I'm not doin' nothing with no goddamn *cop*." He picks up his pace back to his room.

"Daryl," Rick tries again, but Daryl spins and rounds on him.

"No," he says and starts walking backwards. "Got too many shitty memories of uniforms and I ain't doing it. Should'a seen it before, you smelling like gunpowder and metal." Rick blinks and the thought shoots through his head that Daryl knows what he *smells* like. "And I'm not doin' this. I'm not going down this path. Goodbye, Rick." He reaches his motel door and slams in and Rick blinks at the solid wood in front of him.

From inside, he can hear Daryl's voice. "Fuckers are *cops*."

"What fuckers?" Merle's gruff voice answers.

"Those two alphas. Come on, we're going."

"What, I thought you were in your little offerin' shit. Your *considerin'*."

"Fuck you, Merle," Daryl says. "I ain't sticking around with a cop. Come on. We're *leaving*."

Rick blinks and lifts his hand to knock, but he honestly doesn't know what he would say. He tries to parse through it in his head, but then he hears a loud and sharp whistle from Shane, who motions him over with the "hell you doing?" look in his eyes and Rick realizes that he's on duty and he can't do this now. Even if this is the only chance he might get.

The Wounding

The next night shows no signs of Daryl, even though Rick waits at the valley where they met the night before. After that, he figures he needs to take a break from the wolf life, give himself some distance. He remains human for two days after, doing the human things he needs to do--paying bills, cleaning out his apartment, picking a school for Carl. He goes to work, same old same old, and comes home to T.V. and the ever so gourmet mac and cheese. The first night he suffers through, but the second, he turns his nose up at the box, thinks about how the rabbit tasted in his mouth and how he liked the feeling of being *wild*.

He figures it never hurts to practice and he has the next day off work anyway, so he walks out alone into the territory and changes, goes back to the valley he's now dubbing rabbit valley and spends the night chasing around the little buggers, hoping to catch one. He tries to turn off as much of his human mind as he can. Tries to let the wolf take over and slide into the primal mental state as smooth as breathing.

He rushes up and down the valley chasing and when it inevitably doesn't work and the rabbit has *won*, he lays down at the edge of the forest and waits for another one to move. Daryl was right. The place is booming. Rick thinks about going back to their den and grabbing a bite to eat because by one a.m., he's starving. But he figures that the hunger might actually sharpen his senses, so he lays and waits, chases when the rabbits appear.

He is so *very* close to getting one the last time he rushes out, snapping and practically feeling the fur in his teeth. But rabbits are tricky little shits, Rick thinks, and they dive and turn like little sorcerers and in the end, rabbit number fifteen escapes his jaws. He growls and lays his ears back, curses Georgia, and wonders if maybe deer are actually *easier*. Bigger and harder to dart away.

He puts his nose down to the ground and starts sniffing, wondering if maybe he could pick up a deer or, hell, even a damn squirrel or vole at this point in time. But there seems to be nothing *living* in the whole damn county except a bunch of bunnies laughing at him and Rick suddenly feels very much like Wile E. Coyote and wonders if dynamite really is an effective way to get dinner. He walks around the edge of the valley, sniffing things out, and even heads a bit into the forest, opening his senses and looking for something he could damn eat.

But the smell he trips upon isn't prey. Rick catches a whiff of it--woods and swamps latching onto Rick's gut like glue and pulling him in the direction of the trail. Rick whines high and loud into the forest surroundings and picks up his pace, because he knows this is Daryl and he knows it's a fresh scent. He rushes forward, up and down the little hills and inclines until he gets to one and pauses.

There is a trail slid down the hill over the grass like something has fallen and in the heavy brush he can see the outline of a canine body. Rick's hackles raise and he lifts his nose to sniff for danger, but finds none. He carefully slinks forward, watching his step and gets to the pile of brush. He knocks aside a patch of ivy with his nose to reveal Daryl's face--his eyes closed and his body too still.

Rick whines and Daryl doesn't move. He gives a short yip, but nothing. Frowning, Rick reaches forward and pushes Daryl's head with his own, but still no response. He looks at Daryl's chest, though, and can see it slowly lifting and falling, so Rick is at least comforted that he's alive.

And then Rick starts to notice other things--like the blood on Daryl's shoulder and hip and a couple of torn patches of fur. Merle is nowhere in sight and Rick can't even pick up the faintest whiff of him.

Rick paces and growls to himself. He doesn't know how he's suppose to handle this. No one else is around and he doesn't want to leave Daryl alone while he goes for help. But Rick is also afraid to move him in his current state. He flattens his ears and thinks. Civilization is miles away, but he could walk there if needed, put Daryl in the back of his car and drive him to Hershel's.

But the den is closer...Rick takes in his surroundings. He can't be that far from it at all, maybe even less than a mile. He hears the bubbling of the the creek not too far from them and he can use that as a landmarker to walk upstream until he hits the old beat down cabin. His pack will be there, at least, and he can send someone from there to get Hershel.

Nodding to himself, Rick transforms, thanking his lucky stars for the umpteenth million time that clothes shift with him. He bends down and carefully puts his arms under Daryl and lifts, the weight falling on his chest heavy and hard, but doable. Grunting, Rick struggles to walk toward the creek and then further up to the cabin. With every step he takes, he hopes that Daryl doesn't wake up and attack him, not knowing what's going on. But Daryl remains utterly still in his arms, his head hanging nonresponsive.

Luckily, Rick is right about his location and when he makes it to the creek, he can see the familiar bend ahead that he knows is just hiding the cabin. He rushes across the bank as fast as he can, while still watching his step and making sure he doesn't tumble down, further injuring Daryl.

He gets to the cabin, dark but not silent--the shuffle of his pack inside. He burst through the door and Shane jumps up from a corner, big and snarling and mean, but deflates when he sees Rick. He tilts his head and gives Rick a questioning look and Rick *really* wishes he could communicate telepathically as a human, but he can't.

Rick deposits Daryl in the middle of the room and turns to close the door they keep secured, preferring to use the window for exits. When he turns around, Glenn and Carol have come forward and are sniffing Daryl and Michonne has a deep kind of knowing in her eyes that Rick really wants to pick apart with a fine-toothed comb just so *he* can understand himself.

He shifts as quickly as he can and the voices flood in his head--

The fuck you doing bringing him here? Shane growls.

Shane, Carol chastises and looks at Sophia at the same time that Sophia pipes up, *Mom*, *Shane said fuck*.

Is he injured? Glenn asked.

Where'd you find him? Michonne questions.

Is he alive? Carol wants to know.

Stop! Rick tells them all, growling and everyone cuts off their questioning and waits for him to gather his thoughts. *Found him not even a mile from here. Won't wake up. Can't find his brother. Glenn, you're the fastest. Go get Hershel. Now.*

Glenn nods and shoots off, hopping up and out of the window and pelting for the farm.

Carol, might want to take Sophia in the back, Shane says.

Carol nods and starts pushing her daughter that way, even as she's asking to stay and see the new wolf. Shane and Rick exchange a glance and then Michonne comes forward, moving as liquid as the night itself. *Someone should patrol, she says, look for the brother and for what did this.*

Bite marks, Shane says and looks pointedly at Daryl's shoulder. Rick looks down and sees them as well, the indentation of another wolf who got the best of him. Rick lays his ears flat and pushes down a rumbling growl at Daryl's plight.

Go, he tells Michonne and Shane nods his consent. Michonne turns and pads to the window, hops up and out it quickly.

Thought they were leavin', Shane says.

Rick nods. *Yeah. Me too.* He lays down beside Daryl and nudges him for good measure, but he doesn't wake up. Rick sighs heavily and puts his body right beside Daryl's, feeling oddly protective over him and oddly responsible. He feels like there's something nagging in his brain that he should remember. Some little part of something that he should have figured out by now.

Hershel makes it to the cabin in record time, climbing through the window with the slowness and grace that can only come with old age. Rick blinks at him and feels small like he always does in the presence of the great white wolf, his keen eyes studying the situation before him. Hershel looks at Daryl for a minute before nodding and shifting easily into human form. He kneels before the unconscious wolf as Rick, Shane, and Glenn--who returned with Hershel--gather around.

Hershel leans down and studies Daryl's wounds and starts poking him and prodding him and Rick has to stop his forward movement several times, desperately wanting to knock Hershel's hands away from his injured Daryl. But Hershel's trying to help, he tells himself, and stifles the growl in his throat. It doesn't help, though, that when Hershel starts pushing at a particularly torn spot, Daryl's body lets out an unconscious whine of pain and Rick nearly lunges at the man.

Hershel sits back and then wipes his hands off on his pants, shakes his head. Rick whines and shifts to human just so that he can *talk* to the man. “Will he be okay?” he asks, his voice gruff from talking when he wasn’t quite done with his change. Beside him, he sees Shane shift too.

Hershel shrugs, but nods. “He should be fine. Looks pretty banged up, but I don’t see anything major. It looks like he might have knocked himself out or might have received some pretty rough treatment in a fight. He’s probably got a concussion, but it doesn’t look like it something major we should be worried about. As long as he wakes up soon, I’d say he’ll be perfectly fine. All the bleeding wounds are small, look worse than they actually are..” He scratches his head. “Looks to me, Rick, like he got into it with another wolf.”

Shane nods. “That’s what we were thinking, too.” He chews his lip and looks over at Rick. “What’d you think happened?”

Rick shakes his head. “It wasn’t one of us and I’m guessing it wasn’t one of the Greenes, either. But Daryl and Merle were headed away, I heard. Going up--” Rick pauses, snapping his jaw shut. He curses and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Up *north*.”

“*Woodbury*,” Shane grinds out, his voice somehow more dangerous and raw as a human than the wolf’s growl.

Rick nods. “Woodbury.”

Hershel looks down at Daryl and furrows his brow. “Getting to be a problem. Woodbury.”

“His brother,” Shane says and looks over at Rick with wide eyes. He licks his lips. “The big black one. Merle. He’s not here?”

Rick shakes his head. “Couldn’t smell him. If he was, he wasn’t anywhere where Daryl was.”

“Could be...” Shane grunts. “Coulda killed him. Woodbury. Or injured him. Or have him.”

Rick sets his jaw. “Don’t think it’s right to leave him there if they do have him. Think we should find out. For the safety of everyone. If they’ll do that to wolves that pay them no mind...”

“I don’t know if I like you starting a war,” Hershel says.

Rick shakes his head. “Not a war. Self defense.”

“This wolf wasn’t ours,” Hershel says, nodding toward Daryl.

“Might as well be,” Rick growls out with a voice that stops argument. “I say we go find out what happened to Merle.”

“I’m with you, buddy,” Shane says and stomps as if he’s going for the door.

Rick rushes and grabs his arm. “Not now. Let’s gather our forces. Give Daryl the night to wake up in case he has information.”

Shane shakes his head, hard and rough. “Best go now. If he’s still alive, might not be then.”

“Look around, Shane,” Rick says, “Michonne’s gone. And if Maggie and Otis want to go with us...if anyone from Atlanta would agree...that’s a bigger force. That’s more of a chance of standing our ground. We have to gather.”

Shane sets his jaw hard, but nods in assent. “Fine,” he says and sighs, puts a hand in his hair and pulls. “Gonna go out, though. Patrol, find Michonne. Maybe he’s out there.”

Rick nods and watches as Shane transforms and hops through the window and away. Rick looks down at Daryl. “What do we do, doc? To take care of him?”

Hershel shrugs. “Good rest. Safe, warm place. Plenty of fluids. And call me if he doesn’t wake up by afternoon.”

Rick nods firmly and bites his lip, looks around at the cabin. “Takin’ him to my spot,” Rick says and reaches down, carefully hoists Daryl up and starts carrying him to the back closet, tucked away in the bedroom. Glenn tilts his wolf head and Hershel gives Rick a look and Rick suddenly blushes with how it looks. “Uh...figure he should be somewhere secure. You know. Denlike. Closets closed in and I got a pack of blankets. Should be comfortable,” he explains and then rushes off, takes Daryl past the front room where Shane and Michonne usually sleep, past the small study area that Carol and Sophia call theirs, and past the bathroom where Glenn likes to sprawl out in the bathtub because it feels good on his fur.

Rick makes it to the bedroom and slides open the closet door with his foot, putting Daryl down in the stack of quilts he has laid there for his own bed. He briefly looks back into the hallway, but no one has followed him, so Rick changes and pushes the door to the bedroom mostly closed with his paw. He turns toward the closet and walks onto the pile of quilts himself, laying right beside Daryl with their sides pressed together. For warmth, he tells himself. He kicks the closet door mostly closed to shut them in in that close kind of security that his wolf body craves. He sighs and closes his eyes, focuses on listening to Daryl’s even breaths.

The Waking

The bedroom door creaks open and Rick snaps his head up, flying from mostly asleep to fully awake in seconds. He growls as he sees a figure standing in the doorway, but relaxes quickly in embarrassment when he sees it's Hershel, his wolf form towering. *Need to talk to you*, Hershel whispers in his mind and then turns around, heads back to the living room.

Rick sighs and stands up, detangling himself from where he had moved to cover most of Daryl's body with his own in his sleep. Wolf piles are natural, he tells himself, and doesn't think too much more of it. He pads to the door, but then pauses, looking back at Daryl. He doesn't want to leave him alone just in case he wakes up. He wants Daryl to *know* that Rick was looking out for him, to wake up with the scent of Rick heavy in his nose and be comforted that he's somewhere where he could call home. Rick lays his ears back, upset that he has to walk away, and then has a brief idea. He walks to the corner of the room and snatches up his squeaky toy--a worn old Mallard duck that he plays with and, if he's been honest here, even keeps curled up in his pile of blankets most of the time. He takes it back and drops it by Daryl's head, tilting his own and hoping that that will be good enough. That if Daryl wakes up, he'll smell Rick on the duck and realize he's okay.

Slowly, Rick turns and heads out into the living room. *What's up?* he asks Hershel and hopes he doesn't say something about Daryl's injuries being worse than he thought.

Hershel looks over to Michonne, who's back and laying down in the corner looking guilty. *I, um...* she says and then looks away. *I just thought he was coming back here. But he's not here.*

Who? Rick asks, sending confusion both of their ways.

Shane, Michonne says. *I saw him rushing away and I thought he was on his way here. But...*

Hershel looks at Rick and shakes his head. *We think he went to Woodbury.*

Rick's blood freezes. *ALONE?*

We can't find him.

Rick paces and growls low in his throat. *That IDIOT. Michonne, you know what direction he went?*

She nods and stands. *Yeah. What'd you need?*

Track him. Try and catch him. Go! Don't waste anymore time. Rick turns to Hershel. *We'll need to send everyone after him so he doesn't get himself killed.*

Hershel nods. *I've got it. I'll take Glenn with me and get my girls. You and Carol stay with Sophia and Daryl.*

Confliction settles in Rick's mind and he pauses, looking back at the bedroom, but then turning to glance out the window. *I need to find my pack member.*

Someone needs to watch in case he gets worse, Hershel tells Rick. And someone strong needs to be here in case Woodbury is banking on us going out there. Someone to defend the homestead.

Rick shakes his head and is just about to protest again, tell Hershel that it's him who should stay when he hears a low squeaky noise come from the bedroom. His ears perk up and he *hopes* and he's already down the hall and through the door before Hershel can turn to jump through the window outside.

The closet door is half open, but Rick can see Daryl sitting up with one paw on the squeaky duck, holding it down. He looks up at Rick and, even though he looks like shit, it's the best feeling in the world to see him alive and conscious. *Shoulda known you'd be the kind of wolf with a squeaky duck*, Daryl tells him and Rick smiles in relief.

He trots forward and puts his head up against Daryl's, bumping their noses together. *Thought you were dead*, Rick says and lets the panic in his voice seep out. *Was afraid you...*

I'm okay, Daryl says. *I never should have left. We ran into this other pack--*

Woodbury, Rick cuts in. *North of us, right?*

Daryl nods. *Yeah. They cut me off from Merle, chased me down. I got away, but I couldn't find him and I...I didn't know where else to go.*

Rick lays down next to him and resists the urge to start licking Daryl's muzzle. *You're safe here*, he says.

Daryl nods, but flattens his ears and whines. *Merle...do you...do you know where he is? Did he come back too? How long have I been out?*

Rick shakes his head. *He hasn't come back that we've seen. And you've only been out, I don't know, three hours? But Shane is out looking for him. The idiot. He went off on his own. But the rest of the pack is chasing him down and they're going to help.*

Daryl blinks. *We should go, too, then.* He tries to stand, but it's obvious that he's wobbly, so Rick blocks the door and tells him to lay back down. Daryl growls at him, but does as Rick asks and Rick thinks it's more because his body won't let him do anything else than because he wants to.

He'll be okay, Rick says and sits down, watches Daryl to make sure he doesn't stand again. *The rest of the pack will get him and bring him back.*

Daryl grumbles. *Fine. But if we don't find him by morning, I'm going.*

Rick sighs and nods. *Deal. But how are YOU feeling?*

Daryl shrugs in Rick's mind and it's accompanied by the grumpiest sigh that Rick has ever heard. *Fine. Wish those fuckers hadn't whooped me so hard. But it was five to one, so I guess I held my own.* He pauses. *Hungry, though.*

At the mention of food, Rick's own stomach does a weird little flip and it's only then that he realizes he hasn't ate anything at all since he was a human at lunch. He must have been too worried about Daryl to notice it, but now his body is screaming for fuel. *I got chicken,* Rick says, *I mean, I know it's not rabbit, but it'll do, right?*

Daryl thumps his tail once. *Fine, as long as the feathers don't get stuck in my teeth.*

Rick ducks his head under one paw in wolf embarrassment. *...it's packaged.*

Daryl laughs in his mind, a bubbling and deep kind of ripple that causes Rick's fur to shiver the same as the wind. *God. A squeaky toy, a cabin for a den, AND packaged chicken. What the hell am I going to do with you?*

Rick stands up and perks his ears, bouncing in place. *Play with me?* he says and lets his inner puppy out. He grabs the toy from by Daryl's paws and squeaks it loud and then puts it in his paws and bends his front to the ground while sticking his butt in the air and wagging his tail. He squeaks the duck again in rapid succession until it's just a set of honks and starts tossing it into the air, play growling at it.

Holy fuck, it's a poodle, Daryl says, but there's mirth in his voice and Rick just looks him in the eye and squeaks the duck one more time. He tosses it to Daryl and it lands right in front of Daryl's nose. Daryl grabs it and squeaks it softly and Rick pads away happy.

I'll get you dinner, he says and goes to the kitchen to pull out some of their refrigerated chicken from the little cooler they've set up in the corner that can work with wolf paws. As he comes back carrying the package he pauses in the doorway. Daryl is laying there with his tail wrapped firmly around his body, his paws and his nose hidden underneath it. And right there, pressed in the corner of his neck and his shoulder, half buried by his tail, is the squeaky duck. Rick wonders just how much of the beaming joy he's feeling is leaking into Daryl's mind and just how much he's managed to squash down so as not to embarrass himself.

He wags his tail and walks over, drops the chicken in front of Daryl and watches Daryl detangle himself to eat. Rick lays down and takes his share and they eat together, feeling very much like a pack. Sorry I'm not wilder, Rick says and Daryl shrugs.

It's cool, he says and gnaws on the cold chicken.

You look like one of those wolves from the Rockies, Rick says. *I mean, one of those wild ones. And here I am, just a doofus husky.*

Daryl lays his ears back and ducks his head. *No, I don't,* he tells Rick. *Look like a fucking german shepherd.*

Rick psshes at that and shakes his head fiercely. *No, you look the picture of wolfhood. Wolfdom? Wolf Life?*

Daryl snickers. *Don't strain your brain.*

Rick blushes and finishes his chicken and then flops over next to Daryl when Daryl finishes eating. *Would leave you alone, but you're kind of sleeping in my spot so...*

Daryl whines a little, but he thumps his tail, too. *Kind of figured,* he says and then looks up at Rick with wide eyes. *Smells like you. But...I don't mind sharing? If you want to. If not, I can find another spot?*

No, Rick says and shakes his head, *you need extra warmth. And you're hurt. So I'll watch over you.*

Daryl thumps his tail again and then lays very still as Rick scoots closer and proceeds to wolf pile on top of him again. *You don't mind this, do you?* Rick asks and Daryl shakes his head.

Not at all, he tells Rick and Rick must be imagining the whisper and the stars in his voice.

Rick wakes up to just the barest hint of a nuzzle and his name echoing in his mind, soft and resonating, somehow all the hardness of the "ck" taken out of it until it's just a simple little drawl that has never sounded so good. He blinks his eyes open and sees Daryl in front of him, dark blue eyes shining like the first sign of descending night. Rick takes in a breath despite himself, sharp and gasping, but that doesn't help him as his nose fills with the scent of pine cones and still, soft waters.

Daryl seems to notice the scrutiny and he ducks his head and looks away, his ears going from perked to flat in milliseconds. *Sorry,* he says, *didn't wanna wake you, but your pack is coming back.*

Rick frowns and opens his ears, but he doesn't hear anything. He starts to tell Daryl that, but just as he sends the signals Daryl's way, he picks up the soft crunching of leaves under paws. *How did you--*

Good ears, Daryl tells him. *We should go meet them.*

That snaps Rick out of his fuzzy "just woken up" mood and he stands up abruptly and walks to the door. He pauses and waits as Daryl drags himself up and over to Rick and they walk into the living room together, Daryl leaning on Rick to support his weak body.

Rick pauses and thumps his back paw against Carol's door to tell her to come out and then he walks forward into the living room just as Michonne melts from the window frame, jumping easily to the floor. Glenn follows and Rick waits, but no others appear. He sends Michonne a question.

They're okay, she tells him, *Hershel went back to his farm with the girls. And Shane said he and Merle wanted to patrol in case Woodbury follows. The bastard. He almost got himself killed, charging in like a rhino. But I think he took them by surprise as they weren't entirely*

sure what his dumbass plan was. So he made it out and Daryl's brother, too. We covered them as they fled the territory.

Rick sighs a breath of relief, even as his mind wonders just what Shane is doing out with Merle as it's not like Shane to take strangers like that on a mission with him. He dismisses it easily, though, as he has other things to worry about. He asks Michonne for all the details and she gives it to him, tells him to be wary for retaliation. Daryl updates everyone that he's doing fine and officially meets Glenn and Carol, who seem to take to him nicely. Rick announces that Daryl and Merle are joining them--as if anyone didn't know--and doesn't give one shit that Shane isn't here to say it together.

And then they all settle down--Michonne in her corner, Carol and Sophia back in their room, Glenn in the tub...and he and Daryl curled in the closet on top of one another, just like it should be.

The Asking

Chapter Notes

...or the one in which Rick is a TOTAL DUMBASS.

In the morning, Shane is back--Merle with him--and Rick finds them both curled up in the corner of the living room, oddly tangled within one another, kicking each other for space. The rest of the pack is gone--presumably to go about their everyday lives as humans. Rick leaves Shane and Merle to their sleep since he and Shane have the day off and he wanders back into the bedroom to check on Daryl, who's awake and stretching.

Figure I'm just gonna stay changed today, Rick tells him. *Don't feel like walking on two feet, you know?*

Daryl shrugs. *Fine by me. Do you want to...I mean we could go out? Walk around a bit. Muscles feel kind of stiff and might like to stretch them.* He stands, a little shakily, but seems to balance just fine and pads his way over to Rick, head and tail low and submissive.

Rick wags his tail and nods. *Sounds great to me.* They sneak out past Shane and Merle with Daryl giving one gruff little growl their way and then they are out into the woods again and open space. Rick watches as a complete transformation takes over Daryl and he seems to easy right into the woods with a kind of simple grace that just lightens up all his movement--his muscles untensing and his gait turning into more of a lope than a walk.

Daryl leans right up next to Rick and plasters his side to Rick's own and they trot down the river bank, Rick just a nose in front. Rick marvels at how smooth it feels walking with Daryl, their steps so in-sync. It's not like this with the others, not quite. Sure, Michonne or Shane might understand where Rick is leading them and sure, they might all turn at the same time or pause at the same time. But when that happens, external factors are at play--a sound from the brush, a scent wafting by, words ringing in Rick's mind or leaving it to communicate. Nothing like what Rick and Daryl are doing, letting the twitches of each other's body indicate their own movements, letting their muscles and skin roll together like one, like they're not just on the same mental wave frequency, but on the same molecular one, the same *everything*.

Daryl whines and drops his head as if sensing Rick's thoughts and he noses his muzzle under Rick's chin and a strike of pure *energy* run's through Rick's veins, boiling hot and sinful. Rick can't quite place what he's feeling, even though he knows he probably should and that there's something very *intimate* about the situation. But he dismisses it entirely. Tells himself yet again that this is just how wolves act, even if it might seem strange to the outsider. He tells himself that there is nothing weird in Daryl's actions, nothing out of the ordinary, but his tail doesn't seem to quite believe him as it's wagging at a million miles an hour and he feels a doofy kind of smile radiating off of himself in Daryl's direction.

Kind of hungry, Daryl says. Could go to the valley and get some rabbit.

You up for it? Rick questions. I could just run back to the den, grab us more chicken.

Daryl scoffs and detangles himself from Rick, shakes his fur out. *No, thanks. Tastes like rubber. Want somethin' REAL.*

Rick nods, understanding it, and takes the lead as they head back to the rabbit valley. He watches Daryl as they trot off and notices that after the first mile or so, he seems to lose some of his energy and after the next one, he seems to be almost dragging. Rick is glad that the valley isn't far away as he's suddenly realizing that maybe taking injured Daryl out wasn't so good of an idea.

They stop at the top of the valley's slope and Rick moves to stand in front of Daryl before he goes into hunting mode. *I got this*, he says and Daryl tilts his head and perks his ears, giving Rick a look.

You SURE? he asks. *Last time didn't go so well for you.*

I've been practicing, Rick says defensively, *and besides. You're not in a position to hunt. And I...he stands prouder and puffs out his chest...am the alpha and so I can take care of you. Just...go sit at the outcropping. Don't watch me. You'll make me nervous.*

Daryl chuckles at him, but heads off to the rocky area. *Tell me when you get tired of chasin' 'em*, he says and Rick watches as he trots off.

Rick turns to the valley and goes into hunting mode, keeping his senses keen and his body silent. He thinks about watching Daryl hunt and the lessons he learned from that and then he thinks about that time last night when he was so *close* to catching that rabbit and just what he did to make that happen.

It takes Rick twenty minutes and three rabbits before he finally catches one, but he *does*. He grabs it in his jaw and feels its life pour out into his mouth and as he stands there, freshly caught rabbit dangling from his jaw, he feels a swelling of pride for himself and happiness that he can provide for Daryl. There's something primal in it, he recognizes, some kind of instinct that tells him that while he would tell Shane or Carol or Glenn to just go fend for themselves, he has to *feed* Daryl if Daryl asks for it. He has to be there for him and what does that mean? he asks himself briefly.

He trots back up to the outcropping and finds Daryl laying just in front of it, his fur looking warm in the sun. Rick wags his tail and deposits the rabbit in front of Daryl proudly and puffs up, waiting for praise. Daryl laughs, but tells him thank you and that he did a good job. Rick sits beside him and waits as Daryl eats, turning his nose up to the sun and basking in the light that he doesn't usually allow himself to go out in. *Feels good*, Rick says and Daryl hmms in agreement.

Like it, Daryl says, *the sun. The woods. You.*

Rick thumps his tail and smiles. *Me, too*, he says and meets Daryl's eyes, holds them there and studies the depths of their blue, as wide and deep as any valley. He watches as Daryl finally dips his eyes away and lays his head down on the ground, whining, then leaves the rabbit and comes crawling across to Rick, moving slowly as if he's waiting for Rick to tell him no. But how could he? And then Daryl is right there beside him and pressing up against him, laying his head on Rick's paws and Rick takes in a sharp breath at how it makes him feel--at how *perfect* it is and at how much like the other night it was when Rick was just imagining it. But here it is, right here in front of him, and Rick isn't going to miss the opportunity. So he lays his head over Daryl's and hears the thump of Daryl's tail and the happy sigh in his mind.

They sit like that for awhile--Daryl laying right up next to Rick and Rick tangled in him, too--and then ever so quietly, Daryl speaks. *Do you...* he starts and sounds nervous. *Do you, um, want to make it official?*

Rick blinks. *Official?*

Yeah. I mean...I'm kinda ready. If you are.

Rick lifts his head from Daryl's and tilts his ears in confusion. *Huh?* he says intelligently.

Daryl looks up at him, less confident and more tense now. *I just think we've been acting pretty good together, you know? So I kind of just wanted to...ask?*

Ask what?

A wave of frustration and embarrassment hits Rick's mind from Daryl's direction and he tilts his head again. *You're not gonna make me SAY it, are you?* Daryl asks.

Say what? Rick questions and has a deep seated feeling that he's lost the entire thread of this conversation.

Daryl huffs and turns away and Rick wonders just what he's said wrong and is about to ask Daryl as much when Daryl swings back around again. *Do you want to be mates?*

Rick blinks. And then blinks again. But the action doesn't seem to have stopped the fact that Daryl just asked him if he wanted to *mate* with him, so Rick tries a stronger physical approach and sits up, flattens his ears and tries to exude his uncomfortableness. *Mates?!* he asks and he can't help it if a little bit of panic seeps into his voice. He's not gay. He thought he *told* Daryl he wasn't gay and where the hell did Daryl get the idea that he was and that he was *looking?*

Except, his mind supplies, he's been cuddling with this guy and playing with him and bumping muzzles and wagging tails and hell, Rick damn well *told* him he didn't have a mate and so did Daryl take that as an *invitation?*

There are too many thoughts all tangled up in Rick's mind to process right now and besides, he has to focus on the biggest problem at hand, which is that Daryl has stood and backed away from him, hackles raised, and looks ready to bolt in anger and fear. *Yeah*, Daryl says

with the air of someone angry from embarrassment. *Fuck. Thought that's what you were going for, all slid up next to me last night.*

Rick blinks and thinks somehow in all of this, he's taken a hugely wrong turn that has ended him up in Queerville. *No*, Rick says, ignoring the part of him that's suddenly tight and can't breathe. *I'm sorry that you got the wrong impression, but no. I'm not looking for a mate and I'm STRAIGHT anyway. I have...had...I had a wife.*

Daryl scoffs. *Don't look too cozied up to her right now.*

Rick realizes that Daryl is responding to the awkward situation with anger and he tries to tell himself not to respond in kind, but he just can't help the fight or flight response that boils up within him. He bares his teeth. *You don't know anything about me*, he growls and when Daryl bares his teeth back, Rick lunges, tries to push him back into submission. But the submissive and appeasing Daryl from before isn't this one, who meets Rick measure-for-measure with his own growl and snap. Daryl spreads his legs out evenly and holds his stance, rooted into the ground and waits to see just what Rick will do and Rick thinks he looks like a boulder, like an anchor, like an unmoving solid statue and Rick suddenly can't look at him all wild and fierce. Can't hear Daryl's voice in his head anymore because it's confusing and it *hurts*. And so Rick falls back on the other instinct his body is telling him and he bolts.

He turns tail and he leaves Daryl there at the outcropping and he rushes away, not back to the den this time, but back home, to his apartment, where he can become human again and maybe shake off all these feelings coiled up within him and writhing like snakes--things like anger and disappointment, morals and change, and somewhere deep within him, a boiling and burning lust.

The Argument

Rick sheds all of his clothing in the hallway and steps into his shower without any sense of thought, letting the hot water boil through the kinks in his muscles and the tangled and angry mess of emotions in his veins. He sighs as he grabs the bar of soap and lifts it to his nose, breathing in the scent of cleanliness and society, breathing out deep woods, fur and cobalt eyes. He washes his body thoroughly as if to rid it of the sense of change he feels heavy in the air and even after he's done with the shower, he leaves the hot water running to create a heavy steam in the bathroom that helps dull his racing mind.

He steps out of the tub and wraps a towel around his waist, looks at the steamed mirror where he can only see his outline void of any details. He sighs and lifts his hand, runs it across the mirror and watches his reflection meet him--wide eyes, bare heaving chest---before the steam covers it again. He leans over the sink and puts his forehead against the condensated porcelain and tries to put his life in some kind of order.

He's not gay.

He knows he's not. He's as straight as a board. He thinks of Lori and what it was like to be with her, thinks of all the times he pawed at her like a caveman. He thinks of the sex they had at the end, dull and uninteresting, two people given up on one another. But that wasn't him not *liking* it, it was just the failure of their marriage hanging loose and torn between them. He has it bad for women, he tells himself. Hell, think about Angelina Jolie.

But think about Daryl. He sighs and stands up, turns around so that his back is to the sink and he's staring at the nail hole in the wall across from him. He imagines Daryl as a human. Remembers what he looked like when Rick watched him across the street--his strong arms, his long hair. His eyes the same as the eyes that Rick was staring into this morning--so blue and bright and wild. Rick clutches the sink and feels his heart flutter in his chest, feels the red hot surge of *want* take over him, beating wild like a stampede.

It's easier here, standing in his bathroom, for him to recognize the flush of desire. Maybe that's what he's been feeling all along, he's just not acknowledged it. After all, his wolf body is still new and he's still exploring it. It's only been a year and how long does it take teenagers to get used to their new bodies? To recognize what is attraction and need? Is that all Rick is? A dumbass teenager who was blind to his own signals?

He was, he realizes. Except more than just dumb. A fucking *jerk*. He thinks about all the clues he's been giving Daryl, all the times they were slid up next to one another all *coupley* and Rick was too stupid to notice. Rick wants him. He does. He wants to continue to run with Daryl in the woods, wants to continue to pile on top of him at night. He wants to lick his muzzle and wag his tail and let Daryl *share* his squeaky duck. But he also wants to know *human* Daryl. Wants to hear what his voice sounds like when it's gruff with sex, wants to know what his laugh sounds like, wants to feel his arms around Rick, solid and encapsulating.

Rick closes his eyes and sighs happily, lets his head fall back. He wants Daryl. Wants him for a mate.

But as soon as he's thought it, ice shoots through his veins, loud and rough and fast like fear. He jerks himself up and away from the counter, hits the water in the shower so that it'll turn off and throws the door open, watching the steam seep out in little curls of white air. He pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs heavily, walks into his bedroom to get fresh clothing.

He's just finished putting his pants on and has grabbed for a shirt when the doorbell rings. Rick freezes and goes through the list of people it could be, coming up ridiculously blank. Unless...Daryl. Rick swallows and thinks about hiding, but he's not going to be *that* guy. He's already been as big of a douchebag as he could possibly be, so he might as well face up to his own mistakes.

He throws the shirt on as he walks to the door and peaks through the peephole to see Daryl on the other side, leather jacket on and hands stuck into the pockets, head bowed and looking pissed as fuck. Rick figures that he's probably warranted it.

He puts his forehead against the wood and thinks once more about hightailing it back to the bathroom and locking himself in. And then he opens the door. Daryl blinks at him, looking somewhat surprised that Rick had answered. "Hey," Rick says and looks at the door frame, rather than Daryl.

Daryl grunts. "Hey," he says back. Awkward silence descends and Rick shifts his feet, decides to move his gaze to Daryl's worn boots. "So, um..." Daryl continues, "you're a dick." Rick just nods because he's right. "But I thought...well, I owed it to you to tell you. So I'm leaving. And...yeah. Goodbye."

He turns and starts walking down the hallway of Rick's building and panic sets itself alight in Rick's chest. Rick swings himself out into the hallway and rushes forward to Daryl. "What? You're leaving? Don't leave."

Daryl sighs heavily and rounds on him. "Not stayin' here with you like this," he says.

Rick furrows his brow and crosses his arms defensively. "Look, I know I may have given you some mixed up signals---"

"Don't," Daryl says. "There are two choices here. Either we go back to what we were doin' or you let me go."

Rick swallows. "I don't want you to go."

Daryl raises an eyebrow in challenge and sets his stance. "Alright. Then kiss me." He dips his gaze to look at Rick's lips and it might just be Rick's imagination, but he thinks he sees a tiny shiver ghost across Daryl's skin.

Rick balks. "W-kiss you?"

“Yeah,” Daryl says and shrugs, his hands still in his pockets. He meets Rick’s eyes in defiance. “Kiss me.”

“I’m not going to kiss you in a *hallway*,” Rick says, darting his eyes around to see if any of his neighbors have now identified him as the queer resident.

Daryl rolls his eyes and sighs super hard. “No, then. I’m not staying.”

“Look,” Rick says and lets the anger burn up within him, “you can’t expect to just *drop* this on me and I’ll be perfectly fine with it, okay? I need some time to adjust to this whole gay thing.”

“*Drop* this on you?” Daryl says, his voice dangerously low. “Rick, I’m pretty sure I’m not the one who *dropped* anything on anyone. *You* were the one that invited me into your pack. *You* were the one who wanted to have that first damn date, anyway.” *Date?* Rick’s mind thinks in panic, but Daryl isn’t done. “*You* were the one that wanted to share rabbit with me and take care of me when I was hurt and *sleep on top of me* and *nuzzle* me and fucking bring me food. Okay? That’s all mating behavior and that is all. On. You. I was just gonna leave with Merle. Just turn around and go. And if you’d hadn’t piled on top of me, I woulda still left once Merle was okay. But you just keep giving *signals*, don’t you? You keep on wanting to do this to me and I can’t. Okay? I’m shaking with it and no. I’m not staying and I’m not going to mate to a fucking *douchebag* that doesn’t want me. So I’m leaving.” Daryl half-turns to go, but Rick speaks to stop him.

“I don’t want you to leave,” Rick says because it’s the only true statement he can come up with.

Daryl turns back to him, still challenging. “Do you want me to stay?”

Rick opens his mouth and his mind races with something to convince Daryl that he needs to stay here and give Rick time. “You fit in good with the pack,” he ends on.

Daryl shakes his head. “Not enough.”

“Just...wait, okay?”

“No, Rick, I’m not gonna--”

“Stay.”

“No. You got two choices. I go--”

“Don’t go.”

“--or you kiss me.”

Somehow in the conversation, Rick has stepped closer to Daryl and he realizes that he’s within touching distance and suddenly he’s burning with the desire to touch Daryl’s skin because he’s never felt him before, never touched *human* Daryl. So he does. He reaches up and puts one hand on the side of Daryl’s neck and feels Daryl’s muscles tense next to his

palm. He breathes Daryl in, takes in a sharp breath and fills his nose with the familiar scents of pine forests. This time, though, there's something underlying Daryl's scent, something that wasn't there this morning. Something sweet like honeysuckle and sugar, something tempting and *pulling*. "I--" Rick starts, but doesn't know how he's going to finish that sentence and then he realizes that he's leaning closer, that something like magnetic force is pulling him into Daryl and he parts his lips open to capture one of Daryl's, but Daryl steps back, jerks with the force of it and Rick is left standing empty in the hallway. Rick blinks up at Daryl. "I thought that's what you wanted?"

"I don't want it if you don't," Daryl says and turns his head away, stares at the door to the apartment just down from Rick's. Rick watches as his chest lifts and falls in rapid succession, as a pretty little flush heats up his skin.

"...I do?" Rick says, but it's so weak he can't even convince himself. "I...I just...I need time. I don't know."

"Well, I'm leaving," Daryl says again. "Because I don't have time."

"No," Rick says and reaches out, grabs his hand, feels it hot underneath his fingers. "Look, just...how about a compromise?"

Daryl scoffs. "What is there to compromise about? You can't *half* mate."

Rick blinks. "No, but we could get to know each other."

Daryl lifts an eyebrow. "Know you pretty well."

Rick bites his lip and shakes his head. "Yeah, but...I don't know you. I mean, human Daryl. You like this. So..." He pauses and then his eyes light up. "A date! That's what we'll do. We'll go on a date."

"A date," Daryl says, deadpanned. "Been there, done that."

Rick rolls his eyes. "No, a *society date*. You know, movie and dinner. Fancy french restaurant. Human things."

Daryl looks at him, his eyes half closed in boredom. "Do I *look* like the kind of guy that likes *French restaurants*?"

"Alright, fine, Red Lobster then. I don't care. I just...I'm not *used* to this, okay? Just give this to me? It would make me way more comfortable and maybe then I could figure things out."

Daryl stares at him so long and hard that Rick thinks he's going to feel the hard sting of rejection, but Daryl nods. "Alright, fine. *Red Lobster* and a *date*. Fuck me in my *ass*. BUT!--" he says and lifts a finger. "This is it. That's all the time you get. Just tonight." He grimaces and shakes himself, looking incredibly agitated. "Because I'm in heat, you fucker."

The Temptation

“Heat?” Rick asks, but Daryl stutters and psshes and scoffs and turns around and bails with just one call over his shoulder that he’ll be back at six. He leaves Rick standing in the hallway, blinking after him in confusion and a strange little flare of desire.

Rick beelines back for his apartment before any of his neighbors notice the weird homosexual interaction and decide to say something about it. He slams the door shut and locks it for good measure as if the deadbolt can keep out all of the racing thoughts he’s currently having about various parts of male anatomy. What the fuck does it mean for a guy to be in *heat*? he wonders, but shuts that thought down fast because all it does is create a pretty picture in his head of Daryl writhing below him and that certainly isn’t productive.

Rick leans back against the door, chews on his lip and when that doesn’t prove to help the situation he starts pacing in his living room and when THAT doesn’t seem to help, he sits down heavily on the couch and pinches the bridge of his nose.

He needs to talk this through. He needs to say the words out loud and hear how they sound and not be judged by it. He needs to walk through exactly what he’s thinking and feeling and arrive at a clear cut answer and he needs a friend to do that with. But who? Michonne is too aloof and she’d just give him that judgemental smile. He doesn’t know any of the Greenes *that* well and he can talk to Glenn about it, but Glenn would just hem and haw and try not to talk about Maggie in that starry-eyed voice. Lori is the last person on his list and Carol...well, relationship talk would make her think of Ed and he’s not going to do that to her.

So he picks up the phone and dials the most familiar number he knows, waits for his best friend to pick up on the other line.

After a good long six rings, a gruff voice finally answers. “Rick?” Shane says and sounds distracted.

“Hey, man,” Rick says and notices how his own voice sounds squeaky and desperate, “I need to talk to you.”

There’s a pause. “Hold up,” Shane says and then pulls the phone away from his ear so that Rick can only hear his muffled voice as he says to someone else, “Stop it. *For real*. It’s Rick. I gotta...*Merle, goddammit*.” There’s a racket like the phone is being dropped and then Shane comes back on. “Sorry, man. Yeah? What’s up?”

Rick bites his lip, unsure of how to begin. He is suddenly extremely aware that he’s about to talk to Shane about *homo* things, no-homo--well, homo for Rick, but not homo for *Rick and Shane* because gah, *Shane* and Rick has really lost the thread of his own conver--“I’m going on a date with Daryl tonight,” he says, interrupting his own thoughts.

There is a little intake of breath on the other end of the line and then Shane asks, “Daryl? Dixon?”

“Yeah,” Rick says and plows forward. “Yeah, Shane. *A date. With a man.* It’s just...he’s so pretty. You know? And we click really well and we’ve been hanging out and he’s a good hunter and I caught him a rabbit and he just fits so nice against me, you know? And I think I’ve been leading him on, but I didn’t mean to because I didn’t know that what we were doing was *dating* except I guess we’ve been dating, but now I’m going to go on a real date with him. I mean, a human date and he said the word *mate* and now I’m freaking out and he’s in heat. What the hell does that mean, Shane?”

Shane clears his throat. “Hey, man,” he says, his voice deep, “that heat shit is serious business, brother. Don’t fuck it up.”

“...what?” is all Rick can think of to say, but then there are sounds on the other end like Shane is getting distracted again.

“Look,” Shane says after a second, “it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. You like him, you like him. Go with the gay. It’ll be good. Promise. Gotta go, but love you, man. Not in that way. But, you know, take care and shit and I support you and all that bullshit. Okay, going now.” And then...silence.

Rick stares down at the phone and sighs heavily. He’s going on a date tonight. With a man. And his best friend is okay with it. And Rick--the deep part of his soul, at least--is okay with it, too.

At six, Daryl arrives, the leather jacket still on, but the shirt underneath a Pixies band shirt now, complete with nicer looking dark jeans and boots that are cleaner this time. His hair looks thoroughly brushed, his stubble artistically shaven, and overall he has that look about him that says that he hasn’t tried one damn little bit to look that good, but Rick can tell from the small little things that he totally has.

Not that Rick has any room to judge. He took a second shower earlier that afternoon, put on way too much cologne, and then went and took a *third* shower, spent twenty minutes making his curls look both smooth *and* bobby, and put on no less than five different outfits. He wrings his hands at the door when he answers them and tries not to look like a nervous schoolboy in front of Daryl. “Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” Daryl says back and his eyes go kind of heavy-lidded and sparkling, his chin tucked down. “Fuck,” he says as he snaps out of it and takes a step back away from Rick. “Let’s get this fucking thing over with so that I can *breathe* again. Take me to the damn Red Lobster.”

Rick smiles and steps out, grabbing his keys from the dish beside his door. He locks his apartment and leads Daryl down the hall and to his car, trying hard not to think about Daryl following at his hip so smooth and elegantly.

They get to the car and Rick opens the door for Daryl, squashing down the feeling of protectiveness he feels. Daryl grunts at him, but slides in and Rick walks around to the driver’s side, crawls in and watches as Daryl plasters himself to the window, away from Rick.

Rick blinks. “Do I smell bad?”

Daryl looks at him a little cross-eyed. “You fucking smell like triple chocolate cherry cheesecake, man. Just fucking drive before I start licking you.”

Rick goes a deep red, but nods and cranks the car, pulling out of the parking lot. He clears his throat and tries to think of a neutral conversation, finally ending up on the subject of Merle. “Your brother doing okay?” Rick asks.

Daryl grunts. “Mated,” he says.

Rick furrows his brow. “Mated?”

“Yep. Shane,” Daryl tells him and when Rick opens his mouth to ask a follow up question, Daryl cuts him off. “Let’s not talk about them. Let’s talk about us.”

“Us?” Rick asks and Daryl shakes his head.

“I’m dying here, man,” he says and glares out the window, one hand fisting on the jean fabric at his knee. “I don’t know if I’m gonna make it to the Cheddar Biscuits.”

“It’s, um...that bad?” Rick asks and Daryl just whimpers.

“Horny as *fuck*,” he says and Rick’s back goes as rigid as a board. All the sudden, Rick has a one track mind and it’s all he can do to repeat a very simple mantra in his head--don’t look at his crotch, don’t look at his crotch, don’t look at his-

Shit, Daryl is hard. And Rick is, too. Rick swallows and keeps his hands at ten and two on the steering wheel, trying his best not to glue his eyes to the tent Daryl has happening down there. “You, um...” Rick starts, but everything he can think to tell Daryl is massively inappropriate and will probably get him punched. So he just keeps on driving and if he guns it a little bit, Daryl doesn’t say anything.

He does lean his forehead against the window glass, though, and Rick can hear him breathing in increasingly even breaths. “So--” Rick tries, but Daryl snaps at him.

“SHUT UP,” he growls out, “I’m meditating.”

Rick snaps his jaw closed and slows down the car for a stoplight. Daryl opens his eyes and looks out at the road and Rick takes this chance to ask him if there’s anything he can do to help. Daryl scoffs at him. “How about you stop sending ‘I want to fuck your brains out’ hormones my way. That would help.”

Rick blinks. “I’m not--”

“Light’s green.”

For a date, Rick thinks, this isn’t going very well.

Rick parks in the very back of the Red Lobster parking lot and shuts the engine off, turning to Daryl. “We don’t have to do this. I mean, if you’re feeling...whatever it is you’re feeling.” Rick can’t bring himself to say it, can barely bring himself to think it--*in heat*. He gulps. What the fuck does that mean and oh god, is it going to happen to him, too? IS it happening to him? What will happen to him after? He needs the answers to a whole encyclopedia full of questions and he really doesn’t think that there’s a wiki for that.

Daryl sighs super heavily. “No, you wanted your date,” he says. “And you should, you know, get what you want out of it because you better be *ready* if we are going to do this. It’s just holy *shit*.” He rubs at his eyes and sighs again and Rick slants his gaze over to Daryl, his eyes following the curve of his arm to his chest to his thighs and what lies right in between it.

“I could,” Rick says and balks at himself for what he’s about to say, truly understanding the meaning of an out-of-body experience, “help a brother out.”

Daryl blinks at him and goes a little cross-eyed. “No,” Daryl says and his voice is whining and desperate. “No, you *idiot*. That would make it worse.”

Rick blushes. “What would make it better?”

Daryl stares at him and his eyes catch on Rick’s lips. He swallows. “Being close to you. Might...might help.”

Even with Rick’s complete and utter lack of knowledge on the subject, he can tell that that’s a damn ass lie, but he can’t bring himself to actually argue with Daryl right now because Daryl’s eyes are heavy with want and his lips are parted just slightly and his hair looks so damn *soft* and his hand on his jeans, fisting in like he can barely help himself from lunging across the car at Rick, is only serving to turn Rick on instead of off and holy shit, Rick wants to kiss him.

And so he does, hurdles himself across the seat at Daryl and pushes Daryl back against the car window, Rick’s own hip digging into the cup holder that sits between the passenger’s side and the driver’s side seats. Daryl gasps at the quick action and Rick takes totally advantage, slipping his tongue in immediately and letting his body and not his mind dictate the physical advance, going straight for hot and heavy.

Daryl whimpers, high and frenzied, and Rick’s nerves do a weird little series of gymnastic backflips at the noise, his cock growing even harder as it presses against his jeans. He molds himself to Daryl like paint to a wall and Daryl clings to him, grasping at the fabric of Rick’s shirt and letting himself fall under Rick like he’s begging to be owned and Rick’s just in the mood to buy.

Rick tugs his fingers into Daryl’s hair and pulls, presses his mouth down on Daryl’s hard, wanting to make some kind of physical *mark* that will let everyone around them know that Daryl is fucking *Rick’s* and there’s nothing anyone can do about it. Rick takes in a sharp breath as he keeps kissing, soaks in Daryl’s familiar deep scent and then that new scent, too--sickeningly sweet candied-coated nectar and Rick suddenly has a lightning bolt realization that the new scent is probably *Daryl’s heat scent* and *fuck, Daryl is in heat* and *FUCK, Rick is*

responding to that heat and Rick breaks away and throws himself back into his own seat, looking out the window and throwing a hand up over his mouth as if to wipe Daryl off of it.

Rick hears a thump and spares a glance over at Daryl, who has one hand gripping the dashboard, the other splayed flat to the car roof, his eyes squeezed shut and his lip in his mouth, biting down. “Motherfucker,” he says and the last word is just a squeak. “No, didn’t help. Did not help. Is not helping.” He throws himself back into the seat and sinks down into it, his knees coming up to rest on the dashboard.

Rick swallows. “We really don’t have to go in,” he says because how can he walk into Red Lobster with a tent the size of Russia?

Daryl shakes his head once, twice, and then a third time for good measure. “No, I need some distraction,” he says and takes a deep breath. “And besides. I’m hungry and I’m hormonal and I mentioned Cheddar Biscuits.”

Rick laughs, a quick little bark that turns into a full out chuckle. Daryl laughs with him at the absurdity of it all and they both sit in the car for another minute, composing themselves. “Okay,” Rick says, when he’s got up the nerve and no longer feels like he’s going to come in his pants. “Let’s go.”

The Date

Chapter Notes

Just one more chapter to go after this, guys! Things are starting to get rolling...

Also, the issue has been fixed where this was not showing up as updated.

The waitress drops off the basket of biscuits and Daryl has one almost fully in his mouth before her hand is even off of the basket. Rick blushes and tells her to just keep ‘em coming and she nods with only one spare ‘great, I got the crazy ones’ look at Daryl. Rick watches him, too, although he hopes his own looks of ‘what the hell is this’ are far more subtle. The thing is that he has absolutely no idea about what’s going on here. He has no personal experience in the matter of werewolf mating and hell, he can’t even rely on his high school years of elbowing the other boys in health class and going *breasts*.

Daryl rolls his eyes at Rick when he sees Rick looking. “*What?*” he snaps.

Rick shrugs and looks down at the table. “Nothing. Just...trying to figure it all out.”

Daryl grunts. “Pretty simple,” he says.

Rick chews on his lip. “I just...didn’t know that this was a thing. I mean...I have no idea how wolves...” He blushes and drops his voice for the sake of others around him. “...mate.”

Daryl gives him an up-and-down glance and then sighs. “Guess you are pretty new. Suppose you never met a compatible to consider.”

Rick blinks. “There’s that word again. Consider. What does that mean? Considering?”

Daryl looks at him like he’s the biggest dumbass in the world and cocks his head. “Come on. Ain’t that big of a word. Figure that should be easy to figure out. *Considering* if you’re going to take someone as your mate.”

Rick grunts in frustration. “Look, could you give me some slack here? Give me a little information without treating me like a middle schooler?”

Daryl rolls his eyes, but shrugs. “Fine. You want the nitty-gritty or the Hendrickson five stages of mating?”

“Five...stages of mating?” Rick asks and Daryl groans.

“Fine. FINE. Whatever.” He reaches up and scratches the back of his head, sighing hard.

“Okay. Straight into sex ed.” He puts his hands on the table and starts gesturing with them as

he talks. "Alright, so compatible. That's just the term for someone you run into that could potentially be a mate. It's like a blood donor, you know? How if you're blood type A, you can get blood from type A or type O. There are a pool of people in the world that can be your mate. So you run across one of them, you call that person *compatible*. And then...the five stages. So the first is just awareness. Pretty much means puberty or for those turned--like you--it generally means the first three or so months while your body is getting used to itself. Whatever. Then considering. That's when you see someone and you recognize them as a compatible and you consider whether you want to date them or not."

"So..." Rick asks, "that's what we're in right now?"

Daryl lets his mouth hang open a little and his eyes go slack. "Oh, fuck, you stupid bastard. We are WAY past that right now."

Rick swallows. "...okay, so go on."

"Well, then there are the other three stages...you know what? Maybe it's easier if I make this into a story." He reaches forward and pops another biscuit into his mouth. "Okay, so how about this. Once upon a time there were two werewolves. We'll call the first one the cool wolf. He's incredibly awesome and until now has only had a pack with his brother and he's tired of it. That's me, by the way. And then there's the...let's call this one the dick wolf. He's a fucking jerk and he led the cool wolf on. You following me?"

Rick blushes and crosses his arms, leaning back in his chair. "This is almost harassment."

"Yeah, and you *almost* don't deserve it," Daryl says before he continues. "So the cool wolf and the dick wolf met up. And then the considering stage. This was when the dick wolf was giving the eyes to the cool wolf and the cool wolf decided fuck it, he's pretty and he seems nice and I kind of like the way he's a total nerd but still has a little bit of a wild side." Rick blushes and the word *pretty* sticks in his head like cotton candy to the roof of a mouth. "And then the soliciting stage. This is the dating stage. So the cool wolf, who is just *minding his own damn business* gets solicited by the dick wolf who approaches him while he's hunting and proceeds to eat a rabbit with him, effectively making it a date, and then chases him through the woods all boyishly playful and cute. And then, oh, THEN, the cool wolf finds out that the dick wolf is a cop, which shouldn't have actually surprised him because *dick* and then he runs off and gets himself hurt, but the dick wolf becomes less of a dick by caring for him and taking him out on a second date where he hunts him a rabbit and then the bargaining stage. Which is the cool wolf asking the jerk wolf 'do you want to be mates' and the dick wolf saying 'fuck you' to the cool wolf and effectively earning his name as the dickiest douchebag that ever walked the woods." Daryl lets out a big huff. "And THAT is the Hendrickson five stages of mating."

Rick hmphs, thinking that Daryl could have explained it a little less *aggressively* and he wasn't that much of an asshole. Was he? But that still doesn't answer the question that Rick really wants to have answered. "So why are you in heat?" he blurts out. "Isn't that a girl thing?"

Rick flinches back at the fire in Daryl's eyes and is pretty sure that the elderly couple the next table over, who thankfully must have bad hearing, is the only thing that is keeping Rick's eye

decidedly not all kinds of bruised and swollen shut. “No,” Daryl growls, “it is not *a girl thing*. All werewolves get it. Well, all wolves on the, you know, *receiving* end.”

Rick swallows and goes pale, suddenly thinking of things like receiving and giving and topping and bottoming. “But...why?” is all he can think of to say.

Daryl sighs. “Look, it’s...it’s like how we can communicate really well? Like we’re on the same level? It’s like that. Only with hormones. Everything is leading up to the final *act*. You know? The...the last stage.” Rick watches Daryl swallow and gets fascinated with his throat and his Adam’s apple as it bobs. “The claiming stage.” Daryl blinks and Rick blinks back at him. “To make it official, you...have sex. But it’s not normal sex. It’s special. You have to fuck when your chemical levels are at their highest and most open frequency. Like locking in to each other, I guess. So what happens is that the more dominant of the two--you--gives off a signal to the more...well, to me. A chemical and hormonal signal that says you’re *ready* and then I...go into heat. And then you feel it radiating off of me and that causes you to react and then...well...then there’s fucking. And when that’s done, mates. For life. This is...” Daryl looks down at the empty basket of biscuits and flicks it with his finger so it slides a little against the table. “...for life.”

Rick takes in a little breath. He suddenly realizes just how *vulnerable* this must all be for Daryl, just how hard it must be to throw it out there that he’s ready to be taken and Rick is the one who’s made him that way and also the one that rejected him. Rick’s throat closes up a little at the thought of that, at the idea that he’s hurt Daryl so much, and he has to cough to clear it. Dick wolf indeed, he thinks and then pictures wolf Daryl in his mind, all sleek grace and wild ferocity. He swallows down the lump in his throat and moves his hand to put it over Daryl’s, runs a comforting little motion across the top of Daryl’s hand with his thumb. “I’m sorry,” he says because he’s suddenly realized that he hasn’t said it before. He squashes down the arguments that try to follow, the *I’m straight*, the *I’m new at this*, the *I need to process*, and just leaves it at that, just a simple apology for how he’s treated Daryl, just a simple *sorry I was a dick*.

Daryl shrugs. “Fine,” he says and glances up at Rick, his eyes filtering and nervous.

“I don’t know what any of it means,” Rick says and keeps hold of his hand. “But I like you. I do. I don’t know how long it’s going to be until I stop wiggling out, but...having you by my side feels *right*. It feels like how it should be and I...I want to explore it.”

Daryl grunts. “Don’t have too much time to do that.”

“How much, um, time? Do we have?”

Daryl sighs and sits back in his chair, pulling his hand from Rick’s. “Well, my cycle will last about five days. And if we don’t do anything about it, we’ll go back to how it was before until your body sends me more signals. Which, judging from history, will mean I’ll be right back in it. And that’s if we *last* that long without me just crawling across the table and humping your leg like a shih tzu.”

“So I guess the question still stands. How long?”

Daryl shrugs and looks down at the table, picks at a spot where the wood has been chipped. “Tonight.” Rick watches him swallow hard and then blinks as he sees little goosebumps break out across Daryl’s skin. “I can’t...I just can’t. I can’t stay like this around you. So I’m sorry. To push you into it. But tonight or no deal. Tonight or I leave.”

Rick sighs and nods at the empty basket between them. “What...what do I need to know? Is that it?”

Daryl lets out a hard and long breath, the air leaving his lungs with so much force and duration that Rick imagines the organs completely flat and empty. Devoid. “It’s forever. Until one of us dies, at least. It’s not something you can just sign a couple papers and get out from. It’s physical, emotional, biological. It’s...pure. I guess. It’s, um...something you want to do with someone you could love. Someone you do love. It’s a chance to...” He trails off and shrugs. “To be together. To create a family.”

Rick thinks of the arguments he could say to Daryl--I haven’t known you long enough, what if I feel that I love you and I don’t, what if my affection for you wears off, what if this is just another Lori and in five, ten, or fifteen years we start hating one another? But all of those arguments, all of those questions, fall flat. Rick can’t bring himself to ask any of them because he knows the answer to all of them. He knows that none of them matter because what he feels for Daryl right now has settled in his gut with the permanency of lead and sure, maybe before he hadn’t noticed it, maybe the beginning had missed him, but now...*now* he does see it. He does feel it, as steady and bright and solid as the sun.

So instead of all of those stupid things he could ask Daryl, he says, “Kind of thought I’d have more than one kid. You know? But I guess that’s all that I have in the con category.”

Whatever he said makes Daryl as skittish as a colt. He pulls his body into himself and looks at the whole entire restaurant before bringing his eyes back to Rick. He’s as red as a tomato and his eyes betray that kind of pleading look you get when you’re about to tell someone something embarrassing or secret and you’re begging them to take it seriously. “Could...could get pregnant,” he says, his tone low and gruff and *manly*.

Rick blinks. “Pregnant,” he says because he can’t even make it a question.

Daryl grunts and then reaches up to scratch the back of his head, rub his eyes, run his hand over his jaw, do all of those little manly quirks that Rick is starting to find *intriguing* about him. Rick even thinks he sees a bicep flex in there. “The...fuck. *Fuck*. Goddammit, fuck me in the ass with a fucking *crossbow*. *Jesus Christ*.” Daryl rubs his eyes once more and then meets Rick’s gaze and holds it, unblinking. “*Any* werewolf can get pregnant. The cycles cause that to happen. Not the first time, because that’s separate and special kind of hormones. But *later*. Later it could happen. NOT that I’m saying I want to jump into 19 Kids and Counting right now. I’m just throwing it out there.”

“You could get *pregnant*,” Rick says again, “with me.”

“Yep,” Daryl tells him, still holding his gaze.

“Like, we could have kids?”

“Yep.”

“Like how many kids?”

“How many you want?”

Rick swallows and lets that line of questioning trail off because he is so sure that he is underprepared for this kind of planning. “I...I’m going to the restroom. I’ll be back.” He stands up, but before he leaves, he drops his hand to Daryl’s shoulder. “Stay. I’ll be back. I *promise*.”

Daryl nods once, a little jerk of his head, and Rick leaves for the bathroom. Luckily the room is empty, so he can lean over the sink, splash water on his face, close his eyes and look just as freaked out as he feels. He glances up at his reflection and sees his sky blue eyes wide in the glass. He sighs and digs deep down into his body, deeper than he’s ever gone, so deep that he feels like he can actually see the synapses of his own thinking.

Does he want to mate with Daryl?

The question hangs in his mind like a two-ton bomb waiting to be detonated, suspended in a perfect state of timeliness. The sound of the water in the sink dulls out into just a white noise, the outside restaurant fades into nothingness, and Rick can only stare deeply into the mirror, can only watch the reflection of his own eyes--a blue nothing like Daryl’s blue, too light and airy, as fleeting as the summer sky.

Does he want to mate with Daryl?

The answer comes like a gut punch, like the snapping of glass, like the loud readiness of a tornado siren.

Yes.

Fuck yes. He does.

The Mating

Chapter Notes

Here it is, guys! Hope you enjoy the smexy!

Also, due to overwhelming popularity, I am planning an epilogue to this story! You can expect it in a week to two weeks. I don't know yet what form it will take, but I don't expect it to be as large as this fic. But you WILL get to see some pups. ;)

In addition, for those interested in the Merle and Shane dynamic, skarlatha has agreed to write a fic with them from their perspective in this story. Can't wait!

Rick goes back to the table and grabs Daryl's shoulder as he comes around. The brief touch sends a shot of fire singing straight through his muscles, so he keeps contact with Daryl the rest of the time, physically touching him in some way throughout the meal, whether that be holding his hand or running his foot up alongside Daryl's or reaching over and touching his arm. Rick smiles at him when their food comes and tells him to eat up because it's going to be one hell of a night and the sex eyes he tries to exude must be working because he thinks he sees Daryl skip a breath when he says it.

Daryl asks him once if he's decided and Rick says yes, just a simple answer that covers both that question and the follow-up one that Daryl is ready to say. He reaches across the expanse and squeezes Daryl's hand and tells him simply that this is what he wants and Daryl's eyes get so wide and vulnerable, so submissive and pleased, that Rick near has a heart-attack from anticipation.

And then the check is paid. And the night is theirs. Rick stands and offers his hand to Daryl and is both surprised and not at all surprised when he takes it. Daryl stands up beside him and slides his gaze over to Rick, lets Rick pull him through the front door of the restaurant, ignoring the strange looks they get from the southern regulars.

They break out into the night air, slightly cool on Rick's skin, the breeze singing with crickets and cicadas. Rick keeps walking to his car, but Daryl pulls him to a stop, spins Rick around to look at him. Rick stares into his eyes, so close and bright and Daryl slides into his personal space--as if he wasn't there already to begin with--and puts his hand on Rick's cheek, dipping his eyes to Rick's mouth. "Hmm," Daryl says, but to Rick it sounds like *fuck me* and so Rick leans in and captures his mouth with the same kind of hard, wild feel that Daryl smells like, but with the same new undertones--soft and sweet and fucking *loving* and Rick's arms fill with Daryl's body and he hopes to whatever god there is out there that he never has to let him go.

“Want to be wild with you,” Daryl whispers against his lips, his eyes brighter than stars.
“Want to feel you in the woods. Want you to take me as a wolf.”

Rick’s pupils blow out, primal and dangerous and he couldn’t stop the transformation even if he wanted to. He’s thankful that the restaurant isn’t that far from the edge of town, really only a street over from the start of the woods. It’s close enough, in fact, that Rick can start backing Daryl up that way, their feet crunching on the gravel as Rick’s hands find their way under Daryl’s shirt and Rick’s tongue finds its way back into Daryl’s mouth. Daryl sighs happily at the same time that Rick takes a sharp breath inward and it’s so perfect, the air leaking from Daryl’s lungs to Rick’s that Rick has to groan with the rhythm of it.

Daryl’s legs hit the back of a bus stop bench lined up along the street, but it’s a fortunate happening because it means that Rick can press his body to Daryl’s, slide up in between his thighs and dig his fingernails into one of Daryl’s hips. Rick arches Daryl over the bench somewhat and doesn’t give one iota of a fuck that he hears someone get up from it and walk away.

Daryl puts his hand on Rick’s shoulder and digs in and then he opens his legs for Rick to really push up against his groin and they moan together and Rick gives a little thrust that has Daryl throwing his head back and going cross-eyed. Rick leans forward and puts his nose in the juncture of Daryl’s neck and his chin and just pulls in his scent, letting it fill Rick’s body like vodka in a shotglass.

Daryl lets out a little gasping whimper that does all kinds of things to Rick’s body and Rick clutches him hard, suddenly digs his teeth into Daryl’s skin before muttering against it, “You’re nothing but mine.”

Daryl chokes out a little “yes,” and if it’s possible, Rick feels his chemicals getting even higher, getting frenzied and chaotic, churned up and tumbled over and fucking *ready* for what’s coming their way. Daryl wraps an arm around Rick’s neck and puts the other on the side of Rick’s face and leans up to him so hard and fast that Rick has to grasp him and hold on because Daryl has come apart from the bench and is no longer holding himself up, but expecting Rick to catch his weight, expecting to fall up into Rick’s arms just as he’s done. Just as he always will.

Rick catches him and holds him and stares into Daryl’s eyes, so blue and wild, fiercer than any animal, more complex than any human. “You’re my alpha,” Daryl tells him and leans forward, kisses Rick’s jaw in a kind of overpowering deference. “You’re my mate,” he says, moving up and kissing the corner of Rick’s mouth. “I’m *nothing*,” he says, repeating Rick’s words, his leg thrown up on Rick’s waist and his weight carefully balanced against Rick’s arms and his core, “if not *yours*.”

Rick shivers with it, shakes with the power of Daryl’s words and the feel of him and can’t stand the boiling need to run with him, to catch him and to take him. With one final soul searing kiss, he pushes Daryl away and across the road. Daryl skips over it, rushing over the concrete in between low-turned headlights and Rick follows him, ignores a horn he hears that sounds only like the distant and dull grind of civilization. Rick jumps through a patch of briars on the other side of the road, just after Daryl and as he hits the cool darkness of the forest, he feels his body turn lightning fast.

He begins his jump as a human, he ends as a wolf and the second his paws hit the softness of the earth, as soon as he hears the crunch of leaves and feels the wind singing through his fur, he knows he's home and he knows who has done this to him. Daryl. Daryl has made him this way, so wild and pure. He looks and sees Daryl's figure half-hidden behind a tree, his head hanging low, but his ears up, panting with a need that Rick has given to him.

The moonlight slices through his fur, the brown of his body, the darker highlights on his muzzle and eyes and Rick is overcome with the sense of beauty and belonging. Daryl looks at him, catches his gaze and the same blue that was in the parking lot is here as well, as turbulent as a flood.

And then Daryl is off. He turns, his body twisting smooth and primitive, and he dashes forward into the forest. Rick perks up his ears and throws his body forward, putting as much speed as possible behind his motions to catch Daryl.

Rick could smell him before, but it's nothing like this. Before, as a human, it was simple analogies, simple comparisons--he smells *like* the forest, he smells *like* sweetness. Now, though, his senses are broken open and Daryl doesn't smell *like* anything anymore except for himself. Rick takes it in and swims with it, interprets it the same as if it was a language, complex and subtle and mysterious. The tones that underlie Daryl twist and turn, combine and break apart like letters and words and Rick falls into it easily and realizes with a sudden clarity that no one else will sense this--no one else will be able to *read* Daryl like Rick will.

And if that wasn't enough, his mind is broken in as well and Daryl has poured himself into it. Before he could feel emotion when Daryl sent it his way--could feel things like mental smiles and shrugs, frowns and confusion. Now though, he feels Daryl, *is with him*, so much so that he knows that Daryl is beaming with joy for this, that Daryl feels his whole body compelled to bow for Rick, that Daryl won't be an easy catch, but he wants to be *caught*...that Daryl wants to be with him forever. That Daryl loves him.

They rush through the forest, their legs stretched wide and free, their feet flying like autumn leaves, like the wind and dandelion seeds. As they crest a hill, Rick realizes where Daryl is headed, knows that he's going for the rabbit valley and the outcropping where they had their first encounter. He presses his ears back and veers to the right, slips through the underbrush like he was born into it and comes out by the outcropping at the same time that Daryl does.

He cuts Daryl off, slams his body into Daryl and feels more than sees Daryl's body rock into the motion with him, turn and mold until Daryl is below him and Rick is on top and they are there, right *there* and Rick's body knows the position so nicely, has Daryl pinned beneath him so well, and is so ready to just push forward.

Daryl whines and lowers his upper body, lifts his hips and it's all Rick can do not to finish the motion. But he can't. Not without kissing Daryl at least once more. So he pushes off and rolls Daryl with him and somehow Daryl knows *exactly* what he wants and their fur turns to skin in the blink of an eye and Rick's lips are on Daryl's before they've even finished the transformation--as if they've gone from two bodies into one right here and right now, as if Rick has suddenly become the person he's always wanted to be, always knew he was heading for--the last little piece of himself clicked in and turned on. He feels the flush of Daryl's skin under him, the hard lines of his muscles, the scars that he doesn't have to ask about because

he knows why, every little twitch and freckle, every little dip and rise--Rick *feels* them as if they are his own and he gasps at the same time that Daryl does, not even a millisecond separating them and they are one, they are *now*.

For the first time since he was turned, Rick hates that his clothes transform with him. But Daryl snaps forward with a fierce little motion and grabs the fabric of Rick's shirt between his teeth and fucking rips it off, but that's okay with Rick because he has to get to Daryl's skin *now* and they writhe together with hands and mouths and buttons and clothes until there is nothing left but the shreds of their previous selves, torn and tattered around them.

Naked, Rick looks down at Daryl, laying flush and still, his chest heaving, but his eyes as smooth as rivers. Daryl leans forward slowly, his movement achingly slow, like Rick is caught at the precipice of a black hole and time no longer matters. He pushes his head forward until he's in range to peak out his tongue and run it along Rick's jawline. He doesn't have to say the simple things like *fuck me* or *take me* or *claim me* and he doesn't have to tell Rick that his body is ready for him and they don't need anything like silly human preparation.

Daryl lifts his hips at the same time that Rick thrusts forward and *finds* him, slides in as easy as the birth of the universe and then they are kissing again, diving into one another in more ways than just lips and tongues, in more ways than just Rick's cock sliding into Daryl as if he was made to fit with him. Rick feels his body unhitching, his molecules dividing. He feels like the circuits of his thoughts, the energy of his body, the blood of his organs, are no longer his, but theirs. No longer work on a specific *Rick* frequency, but are now a *RickandDaryl*, *Daryl* and *Rick* mode of operation.

He doesn't have to say it because they both *know*, but Daryl wants to hear it out loud and so does he, so Rick thrusts forward hard, grinds Daryl into the dirt of the forest, and whispers against his lips, "I'm going to come in you."

Daryl throws his head back and Rick tangles his fingers in and pulls and one of them--he isn't sure which--says "*as a wolf*" and then Rick is flinging himself off of Daryl and Daryl is flipping around and they are back to primal, back to their other selves that feel it harder, sense it more, and Rick is back in Daryl and Daryl is bending to Rick, coming apart for him so that Rick can put him back together again and it's transcendent, and it's clear, and it's *forever* and Rick hitches and shoves in, feels himself grow and twitch within Daryl and Daryl hitches, too, and then they are both coming and are joined, simultaneous, sliced together.

Daryl's body moves and Rick's moves with it and neither one of them say anything as trite as love because the force between them is too great for those kind of sentiments, too raw to describe. Instead, they fall from each other, their bodies unlocking, but their essence in perfect harmony. Daryl spins, his body low and under Rick, and bends his head up to lick at Rick's muzzle, his tail rushing at a thousand miles an hour. Rick meets his enthusiasm, licks back and pushes at Daryl until Daryl's is lying flat and Rick is piled over him, protective and owning. He feels Daryl in his mind exploding with a feeling of pure happiness and a safety that feels new and exciting with a deep down ache underneath it that spans decades--his whole life. Rick wonders how long Daryl has wanted this, not just him, but *someone*, some kind of permanency, some kind of love and connection.

You're safe with me, Rick says because Daryl needs to hear it and in his mind, Daryl falters with an emotion that is more than sadness at his past or happiness at their situation. He whines, low in his throat and thumps his tail once and Rick covers him as much as he can, blanketing him with his body and his mind, sending calm and love Daryl's way.

Daryl sighs into Rick, his body going boneless and pliant under Rick's presence. *I know*, he says, his voice a southern whisper in the night.

Rick wakes because Daryl wakes. His mind opens as he feels Daryl's begin to stir and their eyes flutter awake at the same time. Daryl looks over at Rick and smiles, his body just as human as Rick's is. Rick grins back and wraps an arm around Daryl, pulling him in tighter. The sun beams down, only shielded by the rocky outcropping and Rick thanks his lucky stars that no random hunter or citizen had stumbled upon two naked men cuddling in the woods.

Daryl's smile is brilliant, wide and unabashed, impossible to contain or stop. Rick leans forward and meets the curve of Daryl's lips with his own, presses them in and kisses him softly. It's close-lipped at first, but soon it opens up to gentle exploration, a slow burning and pouring of emotion into one another. Daryl's skin sighs into Rick, smooth under his touch and Rick covers Daryl again, wanting him to know that he is *kept*, that he is *loved*, that he is *safe*.

They make love under the outcropping, in the soft heat of the fading summer. Rick's body slides into Daryl's with the perfect amount of pressure and Daryl's body meets him, opens for him. It's tight but smooth, slow but tense, hard but fitting. Daryl arches and Rick bends, one falls and one rises, one kisses and one accepts, one hitches and one breathes, one tenses and the other comes.

They fall apart together like ashes into fire--mingled and so much a part of one another that they will never properly separate. When they are finished, they shift and shake their fur out, trot together down to the river and swim into it, bathe themselves in the wild Georgia waters. They play and thrash about, then spend time sunbathing on the rocky bank until it's time to stand--their fur dry except for the sides pressed together that they refused to separate.

Rick mentions that they should go back to the pack and Daryl agrees, so they head off, following the water upstream. Daryl falls beside Rick's hip in a pattern that Rick knows he will feel for the rest of his life, a pattern that he would die without if he were to ever miss it. Along the way, they pause as Daryl bends to lick Rick's muzzle or as Rick bumps him and begins play fighting. They can't keep their paws off of each other and when they enter the cabin, everyone knows it.

Michonne gives them a knowing look and sends them a burst of a coy smile. Carol dips her head in embarrassment as Sophia asks why they look so different, and Glenn mutters about how he wishes he was like that with Maggie. Shane, for his part, struggles out from under Merle, who is sitting with his ass firmly on Shane's shoulders. He stands up and snaps at Merle in a way that Rick can tell is playful and Merle plasters himself to Shane's side, a little behind him and on the left, giving Shane the biggest doe eyes Rick has ever seen.

Shane dips his head a little and looks at Rick. *Guess we've both been busy*, he says and Rick just nods at him. *But, uh*, Shane continues and looks at Daryl, *welcome to the pack*.

Rick smiles. *And welcome, too, Merle*, he says and sees Shane perk up at the approval. And then, just like that, something snaps everyone loose and the other wolves crowd in, joyful and bouncing, pressing themselves to Daryl and Merle and tussling with them, making them officially part of their family. Rick's family.

Rick looks over at Daryl and catches his gaze, feels Daryl's warmth and security seep into his bones and he knows with every ounce of himself, every little atom that makes Rick who he is, that he has made the correct decision, the perfect decision, the best decision of his life.

The Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Alright, guys! Here is it! Some happy puppy fluff!

Daryl jumps through the thick layer of brush right beside the creek bank onto the littered ground of pebbles and sand. He shakes his fur out, dislodging the pine needles and brambles clinging to it and starts trotting toward the old cabin, a large and rather fat rabbit hanging firmly in his jaw. He perks his ears up as he gets closer and listens.

It's still early and the sun hasn't quite yet hit its stride as it ghosts across the land. The morning is crackling with unused potential hiding under a quiet blanket of forest stillness and Daryl can almost imagine the scene inside the cabin--Rick curled up in the old closet he and Daryl use as a bed, their three cubs all piled on top of Rick like Rick is a mattress. He smiles to himself as he trots toward their end of the cabin where they have cut and installed a doggie door for easy access into the bedroom.

Before he gets all the way there, though, a ball of puppy energy bursts through it and stumbles to a stop in the dirt, the gray mass of fur wiggling and looking up at Daryl with her tongue hanging out the side of her mouth and her ears perked up. *DADDY!* she yells and bounds forward.

Judith, Daryl scolds. *Be quiet. Your father is sleeping.*

Judith either doesn't hear him or is pretending not to as she bounds up to Daryl and slams into his side, her head just barely making it up to the start of his chest. *Is that a rabbit? Can I eat it?* she asks and grabs the backend of the rabbit, tugging it and making little puppy growl noises. Daryl wonders if this is what Rick would have looked like as a young werewolf. Judith sure takes after Rick in her looks anyway.

Daryl lets go of the rabbit quickly and watches Judith fall backwards in a big *oomph*. His personal parental style has always been to teach lessons the real way. But Judith isn't hurt and she stands up and shakes herself off. *You think I could go hunting with you? We could catch bigger stuff! Like we could catch a raccoon or a weasel. Or maybe even a DEER. And then I could be QUEEN OF THE FOREST.* Judith lays down and starts gnawing on the rabbit. *You think one day we could go other places? Like to Africa! I bet you could take down a rhino all by yourself.*

Daryl rolls his eyes, but lays down beside her. *Probably want to start small there, pup.*

Why? I could be as awesome as you are.

If Daryl was human, he would raise his eyebrow. *Even awesome people have to practice, Judy.*

Judith huffs at that and is about to say something else when a little bitty tan wolf slinks out of the door, heading toward Daryl with her head down and her paws flying fast but quiet over the terrain. *Hey, Rose,* Daryl says and the pup yawns, stretching her jaw tremendously and proceeds to fall against Daryl's side and rest her head on her paws.

Hey, daddy, she says but is already halfway asleep again.

You go back to sleep, my little flower.

Judith huffs and stands up, bristling. *Why don't you ever call ME your little flower?*

Daryl laughs. *Because you're not named after a flower.*

Yeah, but I don't have a nickname.

Yes, you do.

What is it? Judith asks, standing in front of Daryl defiantly as if she's sure that Daryl won't have an answer for this.

Judy, Daryl says easily.

That's not the same! Judith grumbles. *A ROSE is a type of FLOWER. A JUDITH is not a type of a JUDY.*

Okay, then. How about Queen of the Forest? My little huntress?

So CAN I go hunting? Judith asks, switching subjects easily.

We'll ask your father when he gets---

DADDDDDDDDD!!! Judith calls and is halfway back to the house before Daryl lunges and scoops her up in his jaw. But the damage is already done. After a second, a grumbling and sleep-rumbled Rick steps out of the house, looking bleary eyed at the two of them. He squints and ends up closing one eye and laying one ear back flat on his head.

Judith, he says, his voice rough and not quite alert. *Are you getting in trouble?*

Not today, Judith says as she beams, despite the evidence to the contrary.

Daryl sighs heavily and looks at Rick over Judith's head half-obscuring his vision. He deposits her on the ground with a little grunt and smiles at Rick shyly, lowering his head. *Sorry she woke you, babe,* he says and leans forward, nuzzling Rick's muzzle. Rick wags his tail.

Don't worry about it. Behind Rick, the smallest and shyest of their kids slinks up, attaching to Rick's side like he always is. *Mornin', Chase,* Rick says. *Rosie.*

Hmm? Rose says without really opening her eyes.

Daryl smiles. *You know it's going to be a warm and sunny day. Judith wanted to know if she could go hunting.* Daryl mentally shrugs. *Think it might be time I could give 'em all a lesson.*

Rick nods. *Yeah. Think that would be good for them.*

Daryl grins and leans forward, bumping Rick's muzzle with his nose and scooting up under it into Rick's chest. *And I know you want to get some more sleep,* he says on his and Rick's personal frequency so the kids can't hear. *Think you might need it later.* He lets his eyes sparkle before he pulls away.

KIDS, Daryl calls and stands still as Rick blinks at his form. *We're going hunting.*

Judith whoops for joy and nearly runs into a tree with the amount of circles she's currently invested in making. She bumps Rose by accident enough for Rose to finally wake up and stretch, shaking herself out and looking more alert. Daryl looks back at Chase, who's still at Rick's hip like a fixture. *Come on, buddy,* Daryl says. *I'll let you eat the berries on the way.*

Chase thumps his tail and slinks up to Daryl, sliding in right between Daryl's two paws, his gray Rick-like fur contrasting with Daryl's tan. Daryl gathers his energy to tell Rick they're leaving when suddenly a chorus breaks into his brain so loud, crashing, and chaotic that it can only be *the Walsh family.*

UNCLE DARYL! Seven voices chorus and Daryl has just a second to brace himself before seven writhing puppies come rushing at him, all midnight black and bouncing. The two oldest, Shane and Merle Jr., start hopping around Daryl's front and Chase clings to Daryl's legs as his cousins swarm them.

After a beat, a very exhausted and worn down Merle appears, dragging his body along and looking positively dead on his feet. Merle looks Daryl in the eye and whines. *I...I can't. Brother, I'm having a hard time this morning. There are SEVEN of them.*

Daryl chuckles and looks around at little Shane and Merle, but also Lester and Earl and Rick Jr. and Daryl Jr. and then in the back, the only girl, Merlena. *Want to go hunting?* he asks his niece and nephews. The puppies start jumping over each other and exclaiming yes and Judith bounds in to be the only gray in a sea of black and Merle is going to owe Daryl for this one, but Daryl says he'll take them for the morning. As Merle falls down and cries in relief, Rick smiles in Daryl's direction. *We'll be back by mid-day,* Daryl tells him.

Love you, Rick calls on their frequency.

Love you, too, Daryl calls back, making sure all ten puppies are out in front, Shane Jr. trying to lead the charge with his tongue hanging ridiculously out of his mouth.

Love you more, Rick says and Daryl can feel the warm sleepy denlike state of his mind.

Love you more than more, Daryl says and they keep going like that until Daryl has passed through three fields with the pups and their personal range becomes stretched. He smiles to

the forest around him, immensely happy with his entire life.

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